

THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE

2003

**RESPECTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG PEOPLE:  
A New Perspective on Quaker  
Faith and Practice**

**Helen Bayes**

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In 2000-2001, she was Acting Secretary-General of DCI, based in Geneva, Switzerland. Her work has included projects in the fields of juvenile justice, child soldiers, child labour, child sexual exploitation, and reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

In 1999, she was awarded the Australian Human Rights Medal for her work for the human rights of children and young people.

She has served on various committees for her Meeting and Yearly Meeting. She lives in Canberra with her husband, not too far from her four adult children, their partners and five grandchildren.

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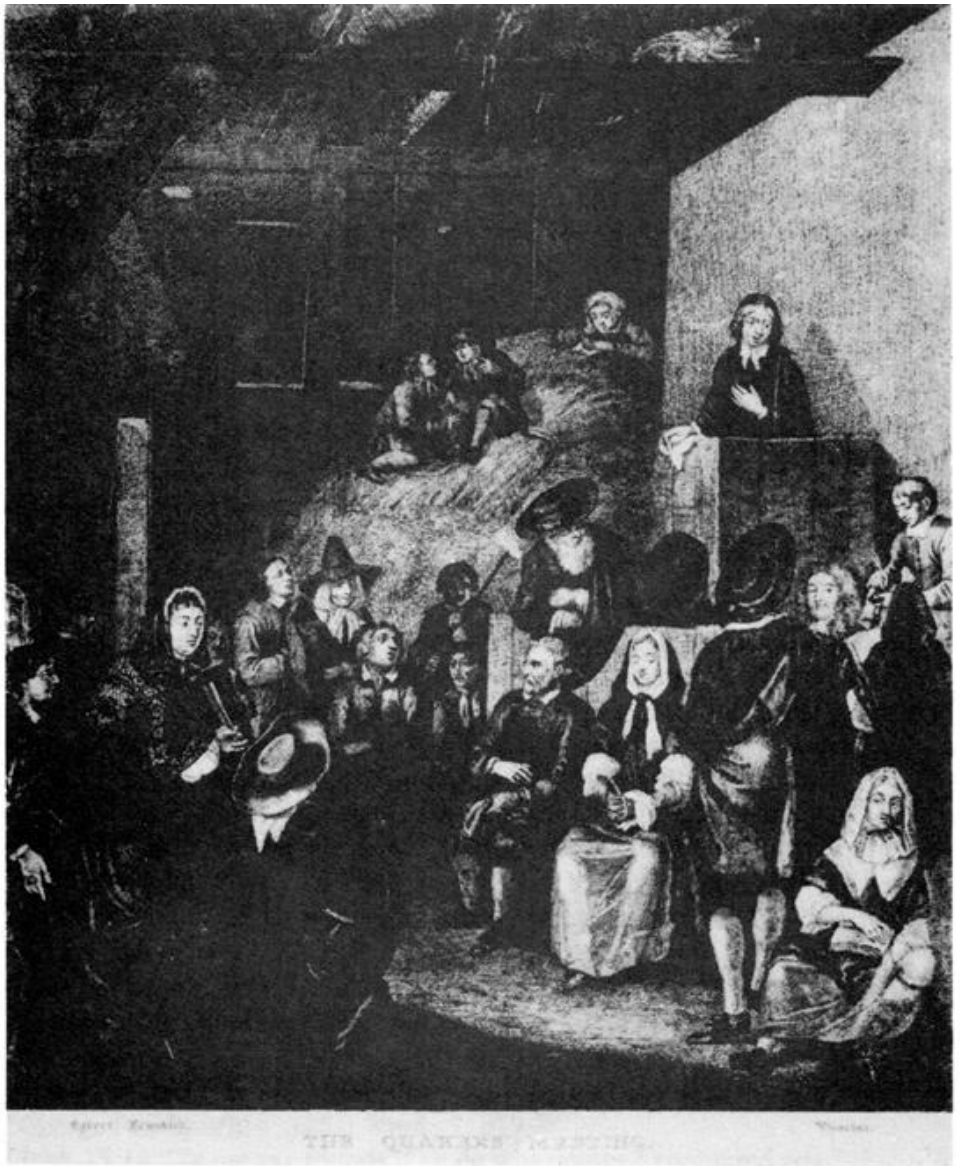
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### **The Quakers Meeting 1692**

There are at least six young people listening to this young male minister. Engraving by Fisscher (fl.1692) after Heemskirk

Courtesy of Friends' House Library, London

## I: INTRODUCTION: THE STORY OF A LEADING

I want to tell you the full story, not just the facts and events. Not just the story of what I have learned about child rights and about early Quaker relationships with children. I want to tell you what it has been like, living with a leading. It seems particularly important to me to share with you what these discoveries have done to my faith in God's presence within me, and what it has done to my relationships with my Meeting and with Quakerism. I also want to share my concerns about the future - for all children, for Quaker children, and for Quaker social witness and service.

I have set out to weave these different threads of experience together, as it was when I was living it. I am trying to make the whole story as accessible to you as it can be - in words. But it has proved difficult to weave accounts of my explorations of early Quakerism, into arguments for the human rights perspective on social policy and development aid. So I have pulled apart fifteen years of faith, work and life and produced four different stories, each of which stands alone and any one of which can be your starting point. Each story provides a different sort of context for the ups and downs of the other three.

My primary message centres on egalitarian relationships with children and young people and my underlying message is the presence and movement of the spirit in each person, whatever their age or circumstance. The presence of God's light inwardly in 'grown-ups' is a fundamental tenet of Quaker faith. But the conviction of this holy presence in children does not sit with us so easily. We tend instead to the psychological view that it 'grows' along with the body and mind. Thus young people are in an interim stage of 'having it a bit' or 'not having it much' depending on how comfortable we adults are with what they say and do - and what they wear! Early Quakers worried very much about how their children and young people spoke, what they did - and what they wore. Speech and clothing were very important forms of witness to equality and simplicity and were one of



the main fields in which tensions between young and older were played out. It took the age of standardised mass-produced clothes for Quakers to stop worrying about plain dress as a key element of Quaker witness.

Early Quakers often referred to the inward light as the ‘seed’. Their view was not that it grew gradually through learning (into ‘wisdom’), but that it was a divine potential, which could burst forth at any time. For them, and for us today, the Seed or the Light is the source of inward guidance, which connects us with the whole of creation and draws us into a total commitment to love and truth. Its power is entirely of God and it has nothing to do with human maturity, education or experience. This principal Quaker belief makes deep connections with the perspective of children and young people as fully human beings who have all the competencies necessary for their life and therefore have the right to be respected and treated equally.

My four stories explore

- the importance of applying human rights standards in Quaker witness and service;
- the child rights movement and its special message for Quakers;
- the struggle of early Friends to relate to children and young people on an egalitarian basis;
- and the way in which the Spirit drew me to work as a child rights activist.

The three phrases which I use, ‘children’s rights’, child rights’ and ‘the human rights of children’, are essentially interchangeable, but I use them variously to emphasise that I am speaking of human rights, which apply to all children, and each child.

Each story leads to conclusions for our own lives, for our practices in worship and in Quaker decision-making, and for our service in the world. I offer these with a clear sense that we need to seek egalitarian relationships and procedures with children and young people, and to respond with trust and encouragement as they speak their Truth to us and to the world.

## II: QUAKERISM AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

The Light in all your consciences ...will let you see Creation, and the Goodness thereof, and will teach you how to use it, and order it in its place ...and how to do good with it, so that there be no Want in creation, nor Cry of oppression; but the Hungry will be fed and the Naked clothed, and the Oppressed set free; and here is the blessing restored to the Creation. (James Parnell, aged 16 or 17)<sup>1</sup>

Quaker faith and witness have deep roots in the idea of heaven on earth - of working for a just and peaceful world through calm, patient and compassionate action. The earliest Friends had to work for just and peaceful treatment of themselves amidst the turmoil, cruelty and intolerance of seventeenth century revolutionary England. However they also understood their goals as essential to the whole of humanity. I had been working on child rights issues for more than ten years before I became aware of this inward longing in myself.

I was sitting beside a campfire in the Flinders Ranges, reading *Heaven on Earth*<sup>2</sup> by Ben Pink Dandelion, Douglas Gwyn and Timothy Peat. These three tutors at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre (UK) compare the inspired insights of early Christians and early Quakers, and draw conclusions about Quaker faith and social witness today. As three emus stepped confidently along their customary path, which happened to be beside our tent, I realised that I am committed to human rights work because it resonates with the same principles that I value so much in Quakerism. We strenuously avoid doing harm or interfering in the individual's personal choices. Our corporate practices are designed first to protect our freedom, and next to create opportunities for safe sharing, so that each, on an equal basis, can follow their spiritual insights in dignity and peace. This is surely the vision behind our Quaker witness in the world.

## Building from Personal Experience

Up to the mid 1980s, my understanding of human rights was based on the work being done then by Amnesty International. As a member of Amnesty International, I learned about prisoners of conscience, about torture and cruelty in prison, and how individual action could persuade governments to release prisoners of conscience and stop torture. While I understood this as human rights work, I did not have any notion of where 'rights' came from, and what else was being done. I felt motivated to help people who were suffering in this way and so I wrote letters with the help of like-minded people - and felt the joy of taking action.

I had also benefited personally from the reform of laws that discriminated against women in the family and the workplace. Along with many others in that period, I became much better informed about domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse, and came to see these, through the women's movement, as human rights issues rather than as *welfare problems*, or *needs* for safety. During the 1970s, I was profoundly moved by the return of land to Aboriginal peoples of Australia, and had worked in the Federal Department of Social Security to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people received their entitlements to benefits and pensions. I had seen how governments can both violate rights and act to protect them, how individual suffering is often caused by the loss of basic rights, and how organised protest can lead to effective remedies. But I really had no sense of the connection between the human rights work of Amnesty International, the women's movement, land rights, or the principle of entitlement to income security. Nor did I see my interest in these issues as any more than a secular commitment to justice.

In 1985 my husband Richard Morton and I decided we would like to adopt a child. We wanted a larger family and to give a home to a child without one. Very quickly we were told that our age (in the forties) meant that we would not be allocated an Australian child. We were advised therefore to find out about overseas adoption and see if we would like to apply that way. The idea of a child from overseas was entirely acceptable to us but we soon became aware of the controversy that surrounded inter-country adoption at that time. Our friends in the development aid field had a pretty negative view of the whole thing, while many adoptive families felt angry and frustrated by the legal and administrative barriers that were put in applicants' way.

We felt we could not proceed without sorting out our own position on this ethical issue. I wrote away to various international organisations to ask what was happening to children in the countries where children were being offered for overseas adoption. I asked: why was this happening, what was being done to help their families of origin or to give them alternative care, what policies did those governments themselves have about foreign applicants?

I received a huge amount of information, much of which is common knowledge to anyone interested in child rights today: that babies and young children are abandoned in many places because of poverty and it is often impossible to trace their family origins; that many orphaned children simply cannot be found local adoptive families; that long-term institutional care deprives and damages children; that children who live on the street are harassed, assaulted and exploited. In terms of official policies, I was told of inadequate resources, inaction, prejudice and paucity of information, but also that some countries have official programs to arrange adoption for those children who have no chance of a family in their own country. As well, I learned about child trafficking, including the buying or theft of children for foreigners who were willing to pay large sums for a child and not concerned about the child's circumstances. The overall picture was appalling, but it did not tell us whether adopting a child would be right or not.

Eventually I heard about some international standards for adoption which had been developed by the UN. I wrote off and received a brief set of very basic but logical rules for administrators – from the point of view of *the child's own interests*. These rules concluded that if a child was completely separated from his or her family, could not be placed in an alternative family, and was therefore facing long-term institutional care, the child's best interests would be better served by adoption to an approved family in another country. This was the clarity we needed. As long as we went through a well-administered program, where the children offered were genuinely available for adoption, we could go ahead.

## A More-or-less Comprehensive Set of Guidelines

My personal story is a simple example of the value of using human rights standards to analyse the rightness and wrongness of a human interaction. We found ethical guidelines, which gave practical details on how to act in 'love and truth' in our own lives, as well as to governments, private enterprise and the community sector.

When I speak of human rights I mean not only the basic concepts but also the extraordinary international process by which human rights are defined, protected and advanced globally. The ‘human rights system’ includes processes which strive to guarantee fundamental human freedoms and egalitarian opportunity to all people, by making governments accountable for the protection of rights and by using democratic processes to advance them. Increasingly, this human rights system is looking at multi-national corporations and non-government armed groups, and at group rights, for example, indigenous peoples because much of their suffering cannot adequately be addressed on an individual basis.

I find human rights treaties inspiring and useful, firstly because they present a vision for humanity which is inclusive, peaceful, just and caring and, secondly, because they say what is necessary for each person to have a whole and normal life and for communities to nurture and support the rich potential of each member. They are shaped so as to transcend human differences in the spirit of equality and, at the same time, underpin differences in the spirit of tolerance and freedom. Importantly, in relation to activism, they carry the weight of agreement between nations of all cultures, religions and economic conditions. They offer a holistic description of how to work for ‘heaven on earth.’

Each sentence in a human rights treaty is expressed as briefly as possible, each word having been chosen, in patient deliberation, by international working parties. They therefore tend to sound formal and legalistic. Of course they are *law* and need to be precise and unambiguous, but I see them also as poetry, as if written by the single hand of humankind to express the deepest desires of the human heart. We must be very cautious therefore about fiddling with the words!

## Rights, Needs, Responsibilities and Activism

I think that many Quakers feel uncomfortable with human rights language, and do not like to see Quaker service in human rights terms. We prefer the soft language of voluntary generosity to meet ‘needs’ and we are uncomfortable with the idea of basic, non-negotiable rights. Indeed the heart of Quaker faith contains the principle that “the letter killeth and the spirit giveth life.”<sup>3</sup> We insist that true guidance on what to do must be found again and again in the wordless springs of love and truth which flow through our being and into our action. Thus Quaker

testimonies are not formulated into creedal statements or rules, and carry no authority - except as the record of insights and experiences that keep recurring, and contain lasting wisdom. Each individual Friend, and each worshipping group is free, and in fact is encouraged, to discern how to interpret and respond to the testimonies, according to their sense of what is right at the time. The idea of rules and 'monitoring compliance' by any outward authority is quite unacceptable among Quakers.

This is not unlike the oldest human rights instruments, called 'Declarations', which include no mechanisms to promote a process of implementation. They are statements of broad principles and aspirations, and rely on the voluntary goodwill of nations and people for their interpretation and realisation. Bearing no enforceable authority, they have very little effect with the unwilling and are therefore seen as 'weak'. Yet, like our testimonies, they work as an opener for renewed inspiration and collaborative effort.

Many later human rights instruments are 'binding' - in other words, implementation is obligatory on those states which choose to ratify them - and they have built-in procedures for monitoring and for public criticism of Governments who fail to implement them. Even so, the action which can be taken against governments that perform poorly is limited to persuasion and diplomatic exhortations to do better. In extreme cases, the international community may withdraw its support for a regime and place sanctions in trade. This avoidance of authority and physical enforcement is also criticised as too weak. Yet we as Quakers surely know that enforcement has very limited value in building peaceful human relationships. Working for 'heaven on earth' through the human rights system is mostly done in quiet corners and invisible processes.

It is very important to understand the crucial distinction between needs and rights, which I referred to at the beginning of this section. When we argue that human needs should (or must) be met, it remains the moral choice of the giver whether to be persuaded and how much to give. The recipient is expected, on the whole, to accept and feel grateful for any generosity shown. By contrast, rights constitute a conscious and well-defined transfer of power and status from the giver to the receiver. Those who have resources accept the obligation to share them, and those who do not have resources are entitled to ask for their share, and receive it without a loss of dignity.

Ideally each human right applies all the time, to everyone. In reality however, this means that rights compete with each other, and between individuals.

The art lies in finding a balance which is egalitarian and effective at the most basic level. Each individual's rights can be guaranteed only if everyone else accepts the *responsibility* of adhering to them. Rights and responsibilities are the two sides of a coin. Each of us has rights but also responsibilities to respect the rights of others. Most importantly, governments and other centres of power that affect people's lives have the responsibility to protect and promote human rights as an essential element of democracy. The implementation of rights starts with the essential process persuading people (and institutions) to accept their responsibility to meet the rights of others.

In the current debate about rights and responsibilities, this mutuality is often ignored. The desirable goal of 'social responsibility' is being used by many governments, including our own, to justify the breaching of rights - as if they can be traded for good behaviour. The argument goes like this: 'If people do not behave in a socially acceptable manner, then the responsibility to respect their rights is correspondingly reduced.' Using the same equation, the government says it can refuse to protect and promote the rights of anyone who 'doesn't deserve it', for example, young offenders or asylum seekers who arrive on our shores without 'going through the proper channels'. This construction of 'human responsibility' is utterly wrong because it ignores the principle that rights are universal and inherent. It is a deeply fearful, reactionary attack on the vision of human equality and dignity, emanating from those who have noticed that human rights mean that *they* have responsibilities and who, believing that they have already 'done enough', want to neutralise the power of rights advocacy.

As a human rights activist, I argue about our *responsibilities* to protect and promote human rights much more frequently than I advocate that individuals assert their own rights. I do believe, however, that it is essential that everyone has a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the rights of others. People need to be alert to breaches of rights so that they speak out and seek support, as well as act as advocates for others. The process is naturally confrontational and can have the appearance of pursuing self-interest or of heating up conflict. We Quakers should recognise this phenomenon easily. Standing up for justice, on the basis of clear principles, instead of behaving like a victim pleading for generosity, seems to be unattractive behaviour to many fellow humans and is commonly construed as antisocial. Quakers have had three and a half centuries' experience of this reaction and we, of all people, should not be misled by such arguments!

Human rights treaties can, in these ways, provide us individually or corporately, with essential input to discern our priorities for social witness. It is a basis for “thinking globally, acting locally.” If we place our efforts into a human rights framework, we will see a bigger and more vivid picture of the future, and we will not only be able to act more strategically, but also will engage in more effective alliances and grasp the deeper meaning in each small action. They also alert us to considerations which might otherwise be ignored. It is never ‘good enough’ to pick out one or two particular rights and deal with them in isolation. In relation to adoption, for example, the child’s right to grow up in a family environment exists alongside his or her equally important rights to identity and citizenship, information about origins, freedom from discrimination, opportunity to express opinions and of course, to education, health care, protection from violence and exploitation, etc. The child rights approach always takes account of the whole set of rights and affirm the *whole* child.

When human rights issues are pursued through the courts, some people express concern about the conflictual nature of proceedings and the costs involved. Negotiation to find compromises is better than litigation, they say. My view is that there is a place for both, for we must beware of compromising on things that really matter. I strongly support therefore the recognition of human rights in domestic law through a constitutionally entrenched Bill of Rights. Then, when the law is applied, there can be procedures which allow for pragmatic negotiations between the parties, aimed at minimising further harm - indeed this is often necessary to balance competing rights. For example, among the reforms necessary to meet the land rights of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations, I would like to see domestic law that recognises all Australian land, private and public, as belonging to the original custodians and returns their right of access for spiritual and cultural reasons. There should be no compromise on this human rights position. However, in implementing such a law, there would need to be local negotiations and a variety of pragmatic arrangements, between the parties directly affected, to promote healing and establish peaceful relations.

People often assume that because I am a human rights activist, I must be a lawyer. This assumption arises because advances in human rights are usually measured by law reform and legal judgments. Certainly, international law, which includes human rights law, is a specialism of the legal profession. However, I hope that the broad arguments I have presented about the importance of human rights, which perhaps have more of the flavour of ethics than of law, will already have indicated that human rights activism is just as much about community education and voluntary action in everyday relationships. We can all be involved



in it. Every individual action to end discrimination, or avoid violence, or protest against injustice, or acknowledge - with an open mind - the value of someone else's different point of view, is a human rights action. If everyone acted to protect the other's human rights, many forms of suffering and disadvantage would simply disappear!

## Looking at Quaker Social Witness

Taking this broad approach to human services and development, I often find it hard to work out in my own mind whether a particular service project is really constructive, or not. It is not enough to do something which is 'good' at first sight. We must do it well, by looking deeply for the causes of suffering or need and by tackling these too. This is a point that Mark Deasey made very clearly in his Backhouse Lecture, 2002. He showed how Quaker service is distinctive because we strive "to come to terms with the root causes of ...distress"<sup>4</sup> and then to advocate "major social and legal change"<sup>5</sup> to prevent the problem recurring.

In order to identify root causes, I believe that human rights standards would help us greatly to obtain a holistic understanding of need and suffering where we wish to help. Also in the spirit of "doing no harm",<sup>6</sup> we will be able to assure ourselves that even the simplest project will not impact negatively on anyone – *either within or outside the immediate picture*. Indeed we can be fairly sure that human rights violations will be among the causes of suffering and will be best tackled by a human rights approach. For example, is the real reason that a particular group is starving because they belong to a marginalised ethnic community which their government systematically ignores? Are this woman and her children destitute because her husband is serving an excessive prison sentence and is this, in turn, because he was given no legal defence in court? Can we foresee that improved foreign access to this isolated community may open it up to child traffickers or paedophile tourists?

Poverty and community problems are intimately linked with human rights issues. The worst human suffering is not due simply to a lack of necessities. It is associated with, and perpetuated by, discrimination, marginalisation, institutional violence, oppressive laws and, *most importantly*, prejudiced refusals on the part of authorities to listen, to hear what the people, children included, are saying and to take their views seriously.

In my child rights work, I have seen many examples of projects which look good in their narrow description (which is usually based on the interests of adults) but which have unintended harmful consequences for children. For example, business loan schemes for women have prompted mothers to withdraw older daughters from school to care for siblings, cook and clean. Other business projects, especially in farming (e.g. dairies, vegetable growing), often rely on children's labour. Targeted projects can reinforce discrimination and exclusion. Local consultation might not have taken account of young people and children. A school, child care centre or children's home might seem an obvious good cause, but I do not think we should give it any support unless we are assured that it does not use physical punishment and does not turn a blind eye to sexual exploitation.

A recent UNHCR investigation<sup>7</sup> has found that the children most vulnerable to sexual exploitation are those without the care of their parents, children in child-headed households, orphaned children, children in foster care, children living with extended family members and children living with just one parent. The investigation was undertaken because of a scandalous story, publicised by the BBC in late 2001, that UNHCR workers in West Africa were using their employed status to sexually exploit refugee children. The report suggests that locally engaged UN staff, peacekeepers, NGO workers and teachers use their control over goods and services and their relatively good incomes to gain sexual favours from children. It concluded that the primary cause is "poverty, lack of livelihood options and consequent inability to meet basic survival needs".

These are precisely the contexts in which Quaker service projects are undertaken. UNHCR has developed guidelines for the attention of all NGOs, and a Watchlist of NGOs who will consistently monitor and report on violations of the rights of refugee children. The Watchlist does not include any Quaker service organisations, yet the protection of refugee children has been a priority for Quaker service for more than a century.<sup>8</sup> Why are Quaker service organisations not involved? Is it because the issue of sexual exploitation is so uncomfortable to deal with? For the sake of the children, we must get over any reluctance and develop transparent procedures which ensure that no child is sexually exploited by anyone we employ. We must also adopt, as part of our service, the role of maintaining an alert watch for children and a commitment to act as their defenders with all the governments, UN agencies and NGOs which are active where we work.

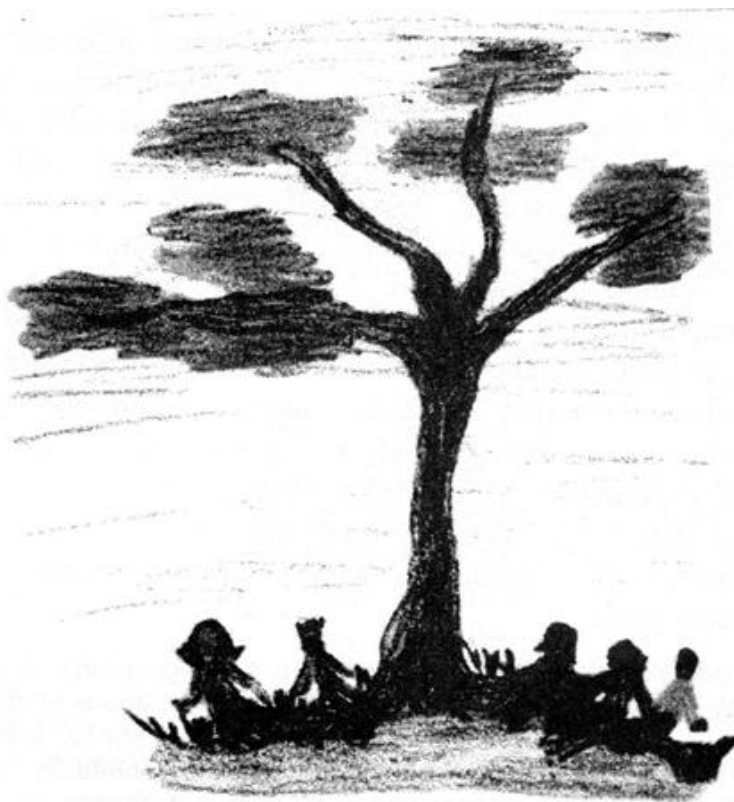
The UNHCR report mentioned above concluded that poverty and lack of basic needs are among the root causes of child exploitation. This is an easy conclusion to draw and one which gives another argument for funding poverty alleviation projects. But poverty itself does not lead to child exploitation. An essential factor is the low priority placed on children's interests by those working for economic development. Another factor is the failure of the local community, including parents, teachers and NGOs, to intervene for children because they feel powerless and resigned. These are issues to do with the *status* of children in people's minds - attitudes which will persist even when the struggle against destitution has been replaced by a struggle to do better. The best way to improve children's status is to engage in discussions with them. Indeed the best way to leave them vulnerable is *not* to do so. While children and young people are often afraid or reluctant to speak up, a reassuring listener can learn a lot about the unwelcome and fearful things that happen to them and how to help children *defend themselves*.

In the light of our commitment to peace and non-violence, Friends might find the forthcoming UN Study on Violence against Children to be of great interest and usefulness. This global analysis of violence against children will invite submissions from the public and from NGOs, hold consultations and develop a plan of action. It is expected to have a far-reaching impact, similar to the UN Study on Children in Armed Conflict, which has been the basis for global campaign to stop the use of children as soldiers. I earnestly hope that Quaker organisations worldwide will participate as actively in this global initiative against violence, as they have in the campaign against the use of child soldiers.

## Participation and Respect for Quaker Children

Human rights standards apply equally to Quaker children and young people. In considering our Friends who are under the age of eighteen years, it is important to look at all the rights contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, the rights which I want particularly to raise here are the rights to participation in our religious and cultural life (Articles 14 and 31), to participate in decision-making (Article 12) and, in the following subsection, the right to be protected from harm (Article 19). Many improvements to children's status depend on these particular rights.<sup>9</sup>

The first Yearly Meeting Business Session in which children participated as equals was an Open Session of Regional Meeting Children's Committees in 1984.<sup>10</sup> This occasion created the opening for the Junior Young Friends to ask that their spoken ministry "be accepted in the light of a gathered meeting and not commented on by adults". This is a very important reflection on their status. The main outcome was that Australia Yearly Meeting recommended to Regional Meetings that "Queries on children should be read out loud in Regional Meeting at least quarterly to keep the corporate responsibility for the children of the Regional Meeting before us."<sup>11</sup> Did any meetings do this for long?



**Rose Dryzek (b 1994) The Children's Meeting**

At Australia Yearly meeting 1998, Young Friends and Junior Young Friends explained their expectation of respect and participation, in more detail:

...we would like older Quakers to know that often we feel what we say in Meeting is treated with disrespect. This disrespect either looks like what we have said is inappropriate and is ignored, or that we are gushed over and we feel patronised. ...We speak because the Spirit moves us. ...We don't want to stop you from thanking us for our contribution, but we'd like you to address the content rather than the age of the speaker. Some of the older Young Friends no longer feel this disrespect, however some of us remember it...<sup>12</sup>

The Yearly Meeting responded rather paternalistically by suggesting a system of mentors for Young Friends “to assist them in understanding what is going on” in business sessions.<sup>13</sup> This has not been taken up. However, in a 2000 Summer School Workshop, Young Friends demonstrated some powerful ways to strengthen friendship and trust between younger and older Friends. They reported that the workshop made a “reaffirmation that older F/friends believe in us and want us.”<sup>14</sup> Since that Yearly Meeting, Young Friends have been able to nominate two representatives to any Yearly Meeting committee and any usual requirement about membership of the Society is waived for them.

When adults show they are really willing to listen, children and young people take very seriously the opportunity to state their views and experiences. Sandy Parker (Victoria Regional Meeting) has found that Junior Young Friends epistles “value and affirm the mutuality” of relationships with adults.<sup>15</sup> He goes on to explain some goals:

Participation and partnership ...involves working in such a way that the traditional power balance between generations shifts in favour of young people taking up more responsibility, and in consequence developing personally, socially and spiritually...It is not an abdication of responsibility, rather it is a change from a relationship of dependence to one of partnership... It is a way of relating that demands our full acceptance of their autonomy, independence and individuality.<sup>16</sup>

Australia Yearly Meeting re-established the Yearly Meeting Children's Committee in 1987, to “foster the flow of ideas between Regional Meetings to encourage the more effective involvement of children and young people in Meetings” and to “encourage the formation of links between individual adults and children in the Society.”<sup>17</sup> This Committee created a surge of initiatives between 1987-97: it adopted Penn Friends in 1988 to encourage correspondence between younger and older Friends,<sup>18</sup> released a guide to planning children's meetings<sup>19</sup> and produced the leaflet we still use on *Children and Quaker Meetings*. Then it

developed guidelines for the children's programs at Australia Yearly Meetings and restored a Young Friends' page to the Australian Friend. In 1994, it enabled all children's meetings to connect meaningfully with the Friends World Committee for Consultation Triennial Gathering by making a 'Rainbow of Hope' banner which was displayed at the Triennial (New Mexico, 1994) and then sent to various Friends' communities around the world.<sup>20</sup> It also prompted Australia Yearly Meeting to put the issue of child participation on the Triennial agenda.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, the Children's Committee has become aligned with the Quaker Education Network, both based in Western Australia. Via a regular newsletter, Quaker Education Network supports Friends in their engagement with local schools and the education system, whether as parents or as teachers or concerned members of the community. Quaker Education Network seems to be serving a lively interest among Friends, but materials and suggestions sent out to Regional Meeting Children's Committees have attracted little response.

In 1996, Elise Boulding of Intermountain Yearly Meeting (USA) gave the Backhouse Lecture, *Our Children, Our Partners* in which she strongly encouraged Friends to respect the views and ideas of the children and young people in our meetings, and to involve them in committees and planning events. Elise Boulding pointed out that an egalitarian relationship with children and young people is much more than nurturing, teaching and providing safety, and she called on all Friends "to involve every child and every teenager in the full range of Quaker activity."<sup>22</sup>

In 1997, Australia Yearly Meeting included a worship session for 'Friends of all ages' and requested that this be included in the programs of future Yearly Meetings<sup>23</sup> but this has not happened. There was a burst of interest in family Meetings for Worship but this faded quickly as individual Friends expressed their dislike of semi-programmed worship. Some Children's Committees invite adult Friends to participate in "the Children's Meeting", but actual participation is close to nil, because people do not want to miss the "big Meeting".

Children's experience of corporate worship is limited to ten minutes, sometimes less, at the end of 'big meeting' and taking part in the shaking of hands. Sometimes Friends are moved to give a summary of earlier ministry with the children in mind and this is often welcomed by older Friends as well as being helpful to children. Some meetings encourage children to speak about their own activity in the notices. But it seems to me that our Meetings, corporately, are clearly not taking children's need to experience worship and their real spiritual

experiences at all seriously, and see nothing in the sharing for ourselves! The plain fact is that we have not been able to sustain the joint adventure which Elise Boulding advocated and which would lead us into rich new spiritual experiences.<sup>24</sup>

Some older Friends see this as a natural cycle, outside our control. When the number of children coming regularly to meeting declines, gatherings of the whole community get confined to special annual ‘family’ events or camps. The consequence of declining child participation in Meetings for Worship and Children’s Meetings is that parents with young children give up attending Quaker meetings as a family. Some turn to the churches for Sunday School and family services which their children find more interesting and more fun. Then it becomes more or less impossible to interest teenagers in Quaker meeting unless they are already friends with others of their own age group who attend.

Meantime Quaker practices are ever-increasingly focussed on serving the spiritual struggles, emotional neediness and social concerns of adults - serious business! Many of our members have no sense of connection with children and do not feel they have anything to share with them. Adults, on the other hand, give no place to fun and community singing in our spiritual practices.<sup>25</sup> This is a spiritual loss to ourselves as well as to children.

It seems to me that some programmed and semi-programmed worship, in which our children participate as equals, would open us to new experiences of wonder, simple truths and joy. Let us give time to joyful, light-hearted ways to worship, for in these we will find healing and renewed humility. Let us also give as much respect to children’s spiritual insights and discoveries as we give to those of older Friends.

## Protecting Quaker Children from Harm

Quaker children are vulnerable to many things in their childhood, just as all children are. They are also just as likely to suffer distress and a sense of helplessness over things happening to their friends and peers. The sorts of suffering experienced in childhood have not changed over the centuries. They include physical and mental abuse, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, bullying, separation from, and loss of, loved ones. What has changed is that we understand much better the long-term impact of unhealed childhood trauma and

grief. Children are also now more likely to know what is going on around them and to be much better informed about services to help them.

But we cannot and must not leave all this to the general community services. Quaker children need to be protected and supported about their experiences, *in the context of our faith and worship*.<sup>26</sup> When we do not address these issues, Quakerism has little relevance to the children's reality. Yet corporately we have turned away from our children and young people because their realities will discomfort our own. It is the same dilemma as that which faced Friends in the 18th century and we are responding with a new sort of quietism. But the response today is entirely different for it excludes children rather than focussing on them (see section IV).

The best source of advice on how to communicate better and make openings between the generations is young people them-selves. A 'Share and Tell' on the issue of sexual harassment and assault among Friends was held at Australia Yearly Meeting 1998. This was attended by sixteen Friends, most of whom knew of instances of harassment either within Australia Yearly Meeting or involving Friends.<sup>27</sup> A Young Friend reported that Young Friends' camp 1998 was free of drugs and sexual activity. However, she would have appreciated some preparation for what she experienced at her first Young Friends' camp! That Share-and-Tell Meeting reported to Australia Yearly Meeting its agreement that sexual exploitation of children is always wrong but this has not led to the establishment of any mechanism to assist Meetings to come to grips with the possibility of people with a sexual interest in children seeking opportunities through our children's programs.

Britain,<sup>28</sup> Canada and Aotearoa/New Zealand Yearly Meetings have introduced mechanisms to urge Meetings to make any form of sexual advances to children impossible in Quaker gatherings and periodically to review their effectiveness. Often the first problem has been to deal with Friends' attitude of denial about the risks to children, and their seriousness for children's bodily health and spiritual well-being. Friends' desire to be warmly sympathetic and welcoming to perpetrators has also been a barrier to action for children. Friends are similarly reluctant to put in place any explicit procedures to support those experiencing domestic violence. We seem to be afraid that these forms of suffering are too complex, too shameful, too private or too 'unQuakerly' (whatever that means) to bring to our Meeting, or to respond through our meeting's corporate procedures. It is easier to believe that specialised community services are a better place to take this business. Thus we treat it as a secular matter



and any moves taken by meetings seem more related to the expectations of the wider community (legal and social awareness) than to our corporate witness to truth and love.

A risk assessment and management paper<sup>29</sup> contains a useful discussion of the legal responsibilities of Friends in relation to Young Friends and to Junior Young Friends in Aotearoa/New Zealand, particularly at camps. The paper recognises that older Young Friends have legal responsibilities for the younger and that more rules, or more adult presence, is not the answer. A simple but cautious risk management process is proposed for all Friends' residential gatherings including an early discussion of ground-rules and safety procedures to ensure that participants 'buy into' them or adapt them to suit the group. It thus creates a good time and place for the shared development of ground rules about sexual activity and drug use.<sup>30</sup> In 1999, adopted amendments to their Handbook which make it clear that child protection issues are the responsibility of Oversight Committees and that each committee should appoint a male and a female contact person who has a specific responsibility to promote the protection of children in the Meeting. Aotearoa/New Zealand Yearly Meeting also introduced complaints procedures and established a Yearly Meeting Sexual Harassment and Sexual Abuse Committee which supports Oversight Committees and their contact persons, provides advice and circulates educational material.<sup>31</sup>

The worst thing about private violence and abuse is the damage it does to the victim's and the perpetrator's ability to feel and listen to the Spirit within. This injury is far above and beyond any physical damage. Interpersonal violence is an attack on God's presence. Early Friends rejected violence because of their sacred duty to greet and nurture that of God in everyone. Today, with all our knowledge and our reasons for caution, we can and, I believe, must ask the Spirit for guidance, in both our worship and our social witness, on how to care for those who are suffering, or have suffered, violence and sexual exploitation.

## The Way Forward - in a Human Rights Framework

The early Quakers' egalitarian witness, their demands for freedom of conscience, access to true information and fair legal processes and in their speaking out against oppression, cruelty and violence, have given strong roots to human rights activism. Modern human rights principles align closely with Quaker faith and practice, then and today. They resonate with our belief in that of

God in everyone, our egalitarian business methods, our concern for peace and non-violent justice, our vision of heaven on earth. Human rights standards are a source of basic guidance about our personal relationships, our Meetings and our corporate witness for peace and justice. They define universal responsibilities to other human beings in every circumstance.

Human rights include the human rights of children – the same basic rights and some additional rights which are especially relevant to the condition of childhood. Child rights is an area of human rights which illuminates what we could be doing better, both in relationship with our Quaker children and young people, and in our humanitarian work.

### **III: DEFENDING THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF CHILDREN**

...the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding... (Preamble, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

...the education of the child shall be directed to the preparation of the child for a responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes, and friendship among all peoples... (Article 29. 1(d))

...every child deprived of his or her liberty shall be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, and in a manner which takes into account the needs of persons of his or her age. (Article 37(c))<sup>32</sup>

In 1987, I was trying to understand the controversy surrounding intercountry adoption and I came across a draft of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This new convention filled me with inspiration. It presented a vision of a world where children are respected and their views taken seriously; where they are neither exploited nor discriminated against; where families are supported to bring them up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding; where gentle guidance is used instead of physical punishment; where their education prepares them for a responsible life in a peaceful and tolerant society; and where effective measures are taken to prevent violence and injustice.

I began reading widely about the extent of suffering endured by children around the world and I was greatly helped by material received from Defence for Children International (DCI). It made me familiar with issues such as 'exploitative child labour', 'sale and trafficking of children', 'child sex tourism' and 'children in conflict with the law'.

Horrifying images of children's suffering in poor regions of the world lined up in my head alongside my existing knowledge of their suffering in my own country. As I came to understand the concept of the child as a holder of human rights, I saw that this change of perspective had a huge potential to change the treatment of children and youth so fundamentally that many sorts of exploitation and cruelty would simply become impossible. And I rejoiced inwardly that here was a movement which was asserting the equal value of children as human beings and the importance of their views and wishes.

## The Beginnings of the Child Rights Movement

Over the next couple of years, I followed the progress of the draft Convention at the UN, celebrated its unanimous adoption at the UN General Assembly in 1989 and joined with others to urge the Australian Government to ratify it promptly. I had to learn fast about the human rights system - the process of signature and ratification by states, the Convention's relationship with Australian domestic law, the ways it could or could not be used by Federal and State courts, and the innovative monitoring role of the new UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. I also was naively puzzled by opposition to the Convention in Australia. Religious groups and others ran alarmist campaigns about family privacy and the biblical 'right' of parents to use physical punishment and, at a more ridiculous level, their 'right' to tidy their children's rooms.

In 1992, I was able to go to an International Children's Rights Congress in Spain. As the work of child rights advocates from every region of the world was discussed, a sense of being *moved* to do this work surfaced and I longed to see similar work being done in Australia, both for Australian children, and for children everywhere. When I was encouraged to set up an Australian Section of DCI, it seemed like an opening, especially given the extent of doubt and controversy in Australia about children having rights.

## The Australian Section of DCI

Because DCI sections are independent and locally-based, they must develop their own programs and find the necessary funding. Some DCI Sections have become very strong and influential in their own country (for example,

Bolivia, Costa Rica, Israel, Netherlands, Palestine, Uganda) while others are very small. Some do not succeed in attracting enough support in their own country to make them viable. Many sections run programs to help children who are working, homeless, detained, imprisoned or suffering from armed conflict. Many of these children need defence from violence, sexual exploitation and discrimination in the community. They also need help to receive fair treatment from authorities such as police, welfare and schools. All sections also actively promote an atmosphere of respect for children's opinions by creating opportunities for them to speak about their concerns to Government, the public and the media.

DCI is a 'bottom-up' organisation, a participatory network, rather like the global network of Quaker Yearly Meetings. This distinguishes DCI significantly from international non-government organisations working on child rights, such as Save the Children, World Vision and *Terre des Hommes*. These organisations are European-based development agencies, managed from a head office. DCI's International Secretariat does not have a 'head office' role. It serves the sections and undertakes work at the international level on their behalf. The values inherent in DCI's egalitarian and 'grass-roots' structure appealed to me at a deep level and I imagined an Australian section which would support the development of sections in the Asia-Pacific region as well as advocating for children in Australia.

The International Secretariat gave me the name of another individual member in South Australia, who had tried to establish a section here but I had great difficulty getting a response because of family and work pressures on her at the time. After several months, in desperation, I rang up a South Australian Friend, Ann Rees, whom I had not met, but who willingly went round to her flat and gave her my message. I remain hugely grateful for that small trusting service that Ann did for another Quaker. But setting up a section was not easy. I found discouragement everywhere (as had the South Australian member). Existing child welfare NGOs were sceptical about the child rights approach, unwilling to commit any support to an international human rights organisation, and generally unenthusiastic about supporting the formation of another NGO.

One Friend advised (meaning, I am sure, to be helpful) that an organisation such as I had in mind would never have enough money and I should work through an existing organisation which had funds. In retrospect I can say it wasn't bad advice! Nevertheless, at the time, another new body, the National Children's and Youth Law Centre was being established by Moira Rayner and others, to give legal advice to children and work for law reform. Also, the Human Rights and

Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) was running an information campaign about the rights of children. In this atmosphere of growing interest, I saw no reason to doubt that DCI could take its place in Australia, and that an Australian Section could take its place in DCI. One afternoon after a meeting at HREOC in Sydney about child rights, I went for a ride on a harbour ferry. As I was carried amongst the beauty of the harbour and the brilliant wealth of the city, I was overwhelmed with images of suffering children all around the world, *and just across the water*. I wept with conviction that this was what I must do, and that somehow, among all these city riches, the work would be resourced.

The Australian section was officially established in 1993. With less than one hundred members, several state groups were established and we created a newsletter, *Australian Children's Rights News*, which was the main attraction for membership subscriptions. The Canberra Branch held a two-day public conference in Canberra in 1994, and the Queensland branch, convened by Brisbane Friend, Ron Frey, held an Asia-Pacific Conference, in 1995, in collaboration with Queensland University of Technology. The Governor-General Sir William Deane opened the conference, and we had four hundred registrants. Despite varied efforts, however, over the next ten years, membership has remained well below two hundred, donations have been minimal and various requests for funding were unsuccessful.

In 1994, I went to Europe again to visit the International Secretariat in Geneva and to attend a European Conference on monitoring children's rights, especially the role and work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. This UN Committee welcomes reports from NGOs to supplement the official reports given to it by Governments. Having thus gained a clear understanding of the reporting process, I was able to obtain grants from the Attorney-General's Department and Save the Children Australia to prepare a comprehensive alternative report for the UN Committee on the status of children's rights in Australia. I held workshops in several capital cities, received a huge number of submissions, and presented the NGO report to the Committee in 1995. I was again present when the Committee considered the Australian Report in 1997, and was interviewed by several journalists about the Australian Government's performance on child rights.

## Turning to Friends

In those early years, I looked to Friends for openings and support. For me, there was a continuous flow between listening to the Spirit in Meeting, my private prayers and what I was being drawn to do with all my free time. I wanted to share with my Meeting what I was learning. In February 1994, I asked the Business Meeting for its support, not knowing really what that meant. As I heard Friends responding with caution and doubt, and the Meeting forming the view that it could not take on a formal involvement in DCI (because it was a non-Quaker organisation), I felt as if the Meeting was tearing itself away from me. When the Clerk read the proposed minute, I could do nothing else but curl up in pain and weep. It is the memory of this searing experience which has led me to write such a full exploration of 'being led' in Section IV.

I feel the urge to defend my Meeting. The views that were expressed by individual Friends encompassed doubts about the idea of children's rights and reluctance to take on a 'new' field of concern. Friends are indeed very busy, both for the Meeting and out in the world. Many are involved in non-Quaker organisations and a Meeting cannot itself be active in all the areas of social witness of its members and attenders. The first and foremost work of a Meeting is to nurture the spiritual life and worship of its members and attenders (including, of course, its children and young people). Any social action by a Meeting must spring out of this corporate spiritual life, experienced in unity. I knew all this and I did not know what I actually needed, and yet I felt abandoned. When the Clerk saw my despair, she put the matter before the Meeting again, and this time the Meeting offered a worship-sharing session after Meeting for Worship in three weeks' time. This small meeting listened to me with more care and offered a support group which was endorsed at the next Business Meeting.

However, the support group's task in relation to the Meeting was undefined. It did not report to the Business Meeting and was seen as simply offering an interested ear. In mid-1994, after I returned from DCI meetings in Europe, I asked my Meeting again for its support. The Meeting renewed the support group and this time named a contact person whose role was to keep in touch with me and report back to the Business Meeting from time to time. It took out a subscription to DCI and wrote to other Regional Meetings suggesting they consider doing the same. Some Meetings began subscribing and I was very grateful for this gesture. I tried to make wider connections with Friends at Yearly Meeting, by putting up displays and giving share-and-tell sessions in 1993 and

1994. However, I did not feel these made any significant connection at the Yearly Meeting level.

The absence of a clear connection between my work and my faith community made me feel spiritually disorientated and reticent about ‘taking Friends’ time’ or making further requests. Somehow it seemed illegitimate to ‘push my barrow’ among Friends. Despite the fact that individual Friends were encouraging and interested, I developed a deep dread of being ‘knocked back’ by Meetings. It increasingly seemed to me that this private drive I had from God was not for me to proselytise among Friends, or be dependent on Friends in doing it. As I pressed on in the wider world, individual Friends were attentive to my state and helped me with my feelings of alienation, so that Meeting for Worship and the Meeting’s social events remained very important to me.

At Yearly Meeting 1995, it was agreed that my concern should become part of the agenda of the Children’s Committee<sup>33</sup> and through that Committee I offered workshops to all Regional Meetings. Canberra, Western Australia and Sydney Regional Meetings took up this offer. In 1998 several members of Sydney Regional Meeting, working with non-Quaker DCI members in Sydney, established a Sydney branch. Valerie Joy and Elaine Polglase took many initiatives to develop the branch but it did not succeed. DCI branches in Queensland and Western Australia had also, by this stage, become inactive.

In 1999 Sydney Regional Meeting held workshops on child soldiers and on Aboriginal child rights issues, wrote letters to the Federal and Northern Territory Governments about mandatory sentencing of young offenders and held a vigil during a national week of action arranged by the Australian Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Friends around the world have responded strongly to the campaign to stop the use of child soldiers, largely, I think, because it dovetails with our anti-war position rather than because it is a human rights issue.

Today the Australian section is very small, with a membership of about one hundred and fifty and there are no state/territory based branches. Given that children’s issues are mostly handled by State and Territory governments, I see that as a significant failure. The establishment of Children’s Commissioners in some states does appear to have been influenced by the work of DCI, but it is not the national grass roots activist organisation that I had envisaged. It is now more like an alert and independent network of experts which advocates child rights issues to the Federal and State Governments – actually, rather similar in role and size to the Canadian, Swiss and Belgian Sections. The newsletter and webpage



provide important information on many national and international child rights issues and comment on the frequently disappointing activities of Australia at the UN. In 1999 DCI Australia launched an annual Child Rights Media Award, with the aim of encouraging media coverage of child rights issues. Although this was awarded to several journalists in 2000 and 2001, it has received very little media coverage.

Over the years, a significant amount of my effort has been devoted to developing a non-Quaker organisation. This a rather different position to working on an acknowledged Quaker concern, through Quaker channels. My work involved a lot of management and administration in which I tried to maintain a high standard of accountability and record-keeping. The Quaker sensitivity to 'responsible stewardship' and 'detail and clarity' in accounts is remarked on by Mark Deasey.<sup>34</sup> I hoped I was establishing a platform on which children's rights work could be done - a platform I wanted eventually to use myself, but also to be available to others. Many Quakers have devoted their effort to setting-up and supporting the growth of non-Quaker organisations. A complete list would be astonishingly long and broad-ranging. It is an important way in which Friends give their service to the world but I am not convinced that it is the best way for us Quakers to follow our leadings. Being led is an intense and mysterious condition which needs to be anchored in account-ability to our faith community. The dynamics of this are explored in Section IV.

## A Shift in Understanding

In the early 1990s, I met a lot of defensiveness and anxiety about the idea of children's rights, among Friends as well as teachers, social workers and neighbours. Many people seemed to get raised hackles when they asked about my work. As long as I referred to distant, terrible suffering, it was OK, but as soon as I framed it in terms of the status of children in ordinary community and family life, people found it threatening. Indeed it is! The recognition of children as equal human beings, *not* of less value than others, not automatically subordinate to adults, *not* the private property of parents, but fully entitled to participate, be taken account of, listened to, and respected in the same way as adults, will have as much social impact as the recognition of the rights of workers, women, those with a disability, and indigenous people.

The resistance to rights-based social change is deep-seated, because it *does* have consequences for our own lives and relationships. Better respect for children, and more attention to children's views will indeed affect all our relationships - for the better. As Elise Boulding says,

The young not only have their own keen powers of observation, they respond to what they see and help change their environment, deal with problems, in ways adults rarely notice. They are in fact co-shapers of their families and of their society, noticed or not.<sup>35</sup>

The essential thing is to have faith that the *humanity* of children - the truth and light in their experiences and viewpoints - will enrich us, individually and as whole communities. Children are not people to be afraid of!

Although I encounter a 'hackles-up' defensive reaction less frequently now, this is because the words 'children's rights' are more familiar. However it is clear from people's responses that it is children's protection rights which are seen as important. Child rights language has become an accepted way to update the arguments for better child protection services. These rights are crucial and they need much better funding, but they do not threaten fundamental changes to our own relationships (as adults and parents) with children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is much more than 'better protection' and its impact will be great, enriching and liberating, but as a global family we are far from that goal.

Indeed, I believe that the Convention represents the greatest challenge to Western, industrialised cultures where children are most strongly conceptualised as 'resources for the future' and the property of parents, rather than as young human beings with their own freedoms and dignity. In Western profiteering culture, children who do not have 'promise' for the economy are punished or marginalised for their perceived lack of value. People living in simpler, more local economies have actually taken more quickly to measures which promote children's participation because they traditionally include children in everything. For example, children's representative parliaments have been established in many African nations as a mechanism for serious consultation with youth by Governments. When children in these places suffer exploitation, it is usually because of grinding poverty and misleading information, not because children are not valued or respected in community life.

## A Wider International Perspective

From 1997 to 2002, I was a member of the International Executive Council of DCI and in 2000-01 I was delegated by the IEC to work as Acting Secretary-General at the International Secretariat in Geneva. I was asked to help solve serious financial and management problems at the international level.<sup>36</sup> This opportunity to become more involved in radical child rights work in Asia, Africa and Latin America, was hugely exciting to me. However, my certainty about being led was already fading and it was not present in my personal enthusiasm for working in Geneva. In fact, as my role in DCI changed, I was able to move on with a sense of relief, glad that choice had been restored to me!

DCI has a long history of work to defend the rights of young offenders and working children, and to stop the sale and trafficking of children, sexual exploitation and violence. This work is funded mainly by European governments, the EEU and some European benevolent foundations. While in Geneva, I helped develop a major new program to defend children who are in conflict with the law. Many marginalised and poor children are particularly in danger of harassment and discrimination by police and courts. Some countries have outdated legislation that allows capital punishment, physical punishment such as whipping, imprisonment in cells with adults and long periods of detention. Many children serve excessive or unjust sentences in prison or detention centres, where they suffer physical and sexual violence and neglect, malnutrition, lose contact with families, and miss out on years of education and normal childhood. After such treatment many need, but rarely receive, assistance to reintegrate with family, school or employment. The children most at risk include child soldiers, child beggars and scavengers, domestic slaves, child workers, refugee and disabled children. A three-year program to provide children in Albania, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Colombia, Ghana, Macedonia, Sri Lanka, and Uganda with socio-legal defence against these appalling violations of their rights was launched in January 2002.

In seeking funding for this project, I was surprised to encounter a remarkably similar pattern of difficulties for many other sections and for the International Secretariat itself, as I had experienced in Australia. The struggle to obtain support for children's rights projects is not particular to Australia. This is how I understand the struggle now. Many long-established organisations which provide services to children now use child rights language as a 'garnish' to what they have always done. Their methods may not have changed much at all, except that children are mentioned more in reports and are more prominent as marketing images. Any new programs for children are likely to be about preventing

exploitation and abuse, because these are the high priorities for major donors and the only things that attract personal donations. Child health and education projects also attract high priority. However there is little funding available for child participation projects or community education about children as rights holders. Juvenile justice is also a low priority.

Many DCI sections work mostly on child defence projects, giving strong support to the children's own opinions and enabling their participation in project management, policy development, lobbying and media work. It is important to remember that, unless adults create these opportunities, it is impossible for children or teenagers to speak *for themselves*, in the way that disadvantaged adults can. The importance of *giving* such opportunities to children has to be recognised and funded from community programs, and this is rarely seen as a priority.

Nevertheless a lot of essential work is being done to advance child rights at the international level by Save the Children, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the World Organisation against Torture, Anti-Slavery International, World Vision International and many regional and national NGOs. In Australia, child rights advocacy seems to be kept alive by a few individuals and coalitions. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), the National Children's and Youth Law Centre, DCI, and various youth legal services work consistently to promote child rights perspectives

## Welcome Affirmations

On the whole, Quakers do not go in for thanks and awards for service. We have strong resistance to taking personal credit for any achievements. The religious basis for this resistance is examined in Section IV. However the story of my child rights work would not be complete without mention of two affirmations which I received from Friends. At Yearly Meeting in Sydney 1997, I was on my way to meetings in Senegal, and to visit DCI in Israel, Palestine, the Netherlands and Geneva. It seemed that my work had made little impact on Friends and I was simply following my leading as a private response to the Spirit working through me. Thus I was taken completely by surprise when the Presiding Clerk, Patricia Firkin, asked me to speak to the Business Meeting. She said "I want you to tell us about this important thing you are doing. You may not exactly be 'travelling in the ministry', but you are travelling in witness to our testimonies and we want to hear you and support you."

This was a deeply meaningful act of recognition and I felt such flooding thankfulness, it took me some moments to recover. Why was this so important to me? It was an affirmation that my faith community was willing to listen corporately to the deepest witness of my faith, and to accept what I was doing as the business of Friends. As I spoke, I felt some healing taking place and an even stronger longing to share it all with Friends. Despite my desire to disappear back into my seat, the Presiding Clerk said, “We want you to go with the knowledge that we will be thinking of you and that you have the support of Australia Yearly Meeting in this important thing that you are doing.” I felt truly blessed. When I met Patricia again recently, I asked her how she came to do this. She said that she felt clear that it had to be done, and had simply done so as the Presiding Clerk.

In 1999, Sydney Regional Meeting nominated me for a national Human Rights Award. It was the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Again I felt deeply grateful for such a gesture of support even though I felt ambivalent about being nominated. It was dreadfully uncomfortable to accept the award, but it *was* also affirming. Most importantly, it affirmed that the work DCI was doing was recognised as important. I was very glad that several Friends and DCI members were present to support me when I had to go up on stage and accept the Medal.

## Keeping to Basics

Children are vulnerable in many ways – the same ways – everywhere. Their instinct and need is to trust, to believe, and to attach emotionally to the adults around them. If they are suffering, they accept it as normal, or blame themselves. Their small, growing bodies are easily disabled by malnutrition, disease and injuries. Their emotional capacities are easily disabled by verbal and physical abuse and relationship deprivation. Their learning and memory are easily disabled by oppressive discipline and absence of choice. Their self-confidence and creativity simply wither away unless they receive encouragement and opportunity. All forms of ill-treatment have a numbing effect on their Spirit. We can no longer claim any comfort from the old adages that ‘They don’t notice’ or ‘They’ll grow out of it’.

Child maltreatment always seems so unnecessary and counter-productive. We are inclined to respond with an outraged “How could they!” - genuinely

feeling that such behaviour is inexplicable. But when new research identifies multiple causes of things like deliberate injury to children and the use of children in the sex industry, it never feels as if it quite answers the question. Poverty? A violent environment? Unemployment? Tradition and culture? None of these fit very well. It seems to me that we have to dig deeper to find the causes of cruelty and exploitation of children. We have to find the attitudes that are so strong that they override the deep human instinct to be gentle and nurturing towards them. I don't have the answer but I do think we have to confront several attitudes prevalent in Western culture: that children's value lies mostly in their potential as adults; that children's capacity for relationship and powers of observation cannot be trusted; that children are private property; and that authoritarian parenting is essential to social stability. We have to put forward some much more hopeful evidence!

These thoughts lead me back to the roots of my own faith in humanity and in children in particular. In the next section I summarise my findings about early Quaker relationships with children, their participation in worship and ministry, and the prayerful guidance that Friends gave to one another about family life and child-rearing. These findings have clarified and confirmed my sense that this work has been part of me for as long as I can remember. Many of my earliest childhood memories are about injustices to children, including myself! In my twenties, I was deeply influenced by the child self-regulation philosophy of AS Neill and Paul and Jean Ritter. It is at the core of Truth as I experience it.

### *Research Resources*

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two Optional Protocols (on Children in Armed Conflict and Sale of Children) can be found at:

[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm)

[www.crin.org/docs/resources/treaties/uncrc.htm](http://www.crin.org/docs/resources/treaties/uncrc.htm)

Other useful websites:

[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc.htm)

[www.defence-for-children.org](http://www.defence-for-children.org)

[www.dci-au.org](http://www.dci-au.org)

[www.crin.org](http://www.crin.org)

[www.unicef.org/crc](http://www.unicef.org/crc)

[www.hrw.org/children](http://www.hrw.org/children)

[www.savethechildren.org.uk/childrights](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/childrights)

[www.amnesty.org.uk/childrights](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/childrights)

## **IV: THE RADICAL INSIGHTS OF EARLY FRIENDS**

About seventh year of my age, it pleased the Lord to reach unto, and secretly incline my mind to love to go to Meetings... and at times (I) would be so tendered in Meetings, and affected with divine goodness (tho' I scarce knew what it was) that desires were raised to feel more... About the ninth and eleventh year of my age, I was frequently sensible of inward reproof... and one time in Meeting I was much broken and tendered, so that many tears ran from my eyes, yet I was sweetly affected with inward comfort. (George Bewley, 1684-1749)<sup>37</sup>

In 2002, while preparing this lecture, I had the opportunity<sup>38</sup> to explore the first hundred years of Quaker epistles, journals and tracts for indications of how adult Friends related to children and young people in the context of their extraordinary new perspective on the human condition. I was hoping I might find some precursors to the child rights movement, in the same way that other researchers have found Quaker roots to other egalitarian movements. I wanted to find out whether the roots of my own commitment to the rights of children have a particular Quaker history. I also wanted to see how Quaker children themselves responded in previous times to Quaker ministry.

Many early Friends wrote epistles (or open letters) as a way of ministering to local Meetings and isolated Friends. In each epistle the writer freely explains his or her beliefs and concerns about witnessing truth and love in daily behaviour. Much of the material is repetitive, the same comforting phrases being used by different writers. By noting what is repeated, or newly exhorted, the reader can trace the developing concerns and persisting values of Friends. Additional evidence can be found in the spiritually mature, reflective journals, or life stories, which many mature Friends wrote to encourage younger Friends through their struggles with seeking and persecution.

## Sin and Salvation

Many of the earliest Friends were convinced in their early teens or young adulthood. As *children*, they had seen the world being torn apart by civil war and religious persecution. They were open to new radical understandings of the human condition and their relationship with God. However they had also been brought up to be deeply fearful of divine judgement. Although they rejected church authority over spiritual matters, the question of how to be personally cleansed of *sin*, to find salvation and be safe from damnation, was still a crucial issue for their new-found faith. Fox's central teaching was to wait in meekness and humility until God's truth was inwardly revealed, and then to follow it consistently and reach out to the same process in all people. Life lived this way would be so pure and innocent that the urge to sin would already have died.

To preserve this life, early Friends gave a great deal of ministry to each other about family life and caring for the young. The danger of being tempted away from the true way was ever-present and the potential for this in children was not only a threat to the child's own salvation, but also to the parents'. It was not a secular social conscience that drove Friends to care for one another, but a sense of duty to protect and nurture the divine potential in each person's life.

Today, if we use the word sin at all, we do not mean specific wrongful acts but a 'turning away from God' and this is often seen as characterised by selfish and antisocial behaviour. We do not construe our unhappy human experiences as judgement and punishment by God. In the 17th century, sin was anything out-of-line with Orthodox Church teaching and had begun with the original sin of Adam and Eve. It led to punishment by God on earth and eternal torment after death. Every child inherited this sin, in being human, and had to be cleansed and disciplined to become free of it. The church demanded obedience and ritual to save people from this fate, and indeed supported a great deal of state violence and cruelty to children with the same justification.

This doctrine of original sin had no place in the new-found faith of early Friends. Although they believed that children were born with a natural *tendency* to sin, they were "innocent and harmless".<sup>39</sup> Barclay dismissed the church's teaching on original sin as "an unscriptural barbarism" and argued, on biblical authority, that sin cannot be imputed to children, because they are "utterly incapable" of knowing the law.<sup>40</sup> He said that innocence could be lost by wrongful acts which were done consciously, rather than by the act itself.



Barclay's theological argument set the scene for a legislated minimum age of criminal responsibility.

This position was not unique to early Friends. It had already been taken up by Independent Baptists and other seekers. What was unique to Friends was their conviction that each child is endowed with an Inward Light. In some of his earliest writings, Fox assured Friends that children were treasured gifts from God, whom God cared for<sup>41</sup> and that "infants are enlightened with the Light of Christ".<sup>42</sup> This principle never became controversial among Friends. In one of the first epistles directed specifically at parents, in 1660, Humphrey Smith wrote reassuringly:

In many tender babes and young children there is a meek, innocent, harmless principle from God... That lighteth every man that cometh into the world... Look at young children...see how innocent and lamblike they look; and consider if every thing were not so good as God made it.<sup>43</sup>

The view that children are innocent and endowed with Inward Light meant a major change in the status of the child and the role of parents. Inherited sin did not have to be washed away by the ritual of infant baptism. Parents no longer had the responsibility to cleanse the child of sin by punishment. This had been a task which they could never be confident of achieving and one which had encouraged early cruelty to babies and harsh treatment of children. Instead, parents had the sacred duty to love, nurture, teach and guide their child and would have the help of God, who was present in their child as well as in themselves, to do so.

It took the next two centuries, and the stimulation of social critics such as Rousseau (1712-1778), Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Dickens (1812-1870), for European culture to reject punitive and exploitative attitudes to children and the associated cruelty at home and at school to recede. Slowly but surely, families became child-focussed, mothers became more significant in family life, child-rearing practices and educational methods became more liberal, and harsh punishment was replaced by gentler methods of guidance. But it was not until the 'free child' philosophies of A.S Neill<sup>44</sup> and Paul and Jean Ritter<sup>45</sup> in the 20th century that the perspective of the child as capable and inwardly guided re-emerged. Today, the child's innate capacity for social responsibility, generosity, and fairness is an essential principle of education and child care theory. However children are still not generally seen as spiritually equal, even among Quakers, because we see spiritual wisdom as the product of 'years of seeking and

experience' rather than as the divine seed of truth planted in us all. And so we fail to live our faith to its full egalitarian conclusion.

## One Light in Parent and Child

Early Friends' ministry was often directed at children and young people themselves. Fox urged young people to consider themselves as "the great work of God" and know that "God forms and fashions you in the womb", and "hath brought you forth, that you may choose good and forsake the evil".<sup>46</sup>

In 1663, William Smith, an Independent Baptist minister who became a Quaker in 1658, probably in his early thirties, produced a set of open letters to Little Children, Young People and to Parents entitled "Universal Love". The letters described each one's duties in their relationship with God and each other. To little children he wrote:

... you must mind the Light with which Christ enlightens you, which Light is in your Consciences, and with its light, it will let you see when you think any bad thought or speak any bad words, or when you do anything amiss... and if you love the Light, the Light will guide you, and lead you in the way of Peace.<sup>47</sup>

and to young Friends:

(God) hath also placed in you a measure of life that is pure of himself and is immortal, which in your consciences doth manifest itself in brightness... and you are to mind that Principle which is pure above all things, and to keep your minds stayed in it, and when you are reprov'd with it, do not start aside, but close in with it, and with its light, that you may behold yourselves amiss.<sup>48</sup>

Then he confidently reassured parents that they would come into unity with their children if they "come to that of God in themselves".<sup>49</sup> Isaac Pennington's similar views were put into a letter to a worried parent. He wrote that her children would, by their own Light, discover religious practices "suitable to their state".<sup>50</sup> William Penn wrote an open letter to the 'young convinced' urging them "to take heed to the word of God in their hearts ... and to meditate upon it... by which their ways, words, and hearts, and all may be kept clean" and let "neither father nor mother" deter them from their "holy constancy".<sup>51</sup>

Not only did children have the same truth and the Light within, but their seeking must follow the same path. Writing from prison, James Naylor warned “young men and maidens” about the spiritual struggles that they must go through:

...into the likeness of his death you must come... even such trials as cannot be declared to another shall you learn... and your faithfulness... must be thoroughly proved.<sup>52</sup>

Thus the first generation Friends had no doubt that they had a sacred duty to respect and nurture the spiritual capacity of children. The goal was to raise children so that they would become “partakers of the heavenly life” and “that God may be glorified throughout all your families”.<sup>53</sup> They knew that this meant not standing in the way of the child’s own capacity to discover his or her own faithful life.

## Children of God, all in Unity

George Fox often described the growing community of Friends as “children of God” and used the family as a model to describe how Friends should respect and care for one another, and resolve differences. Fox used direct references to the teachings of the Apostle Paul to the early Christians and called on Friends to “keep in the oneness...all one family of love, children of one father and of the household of God.”<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to note that although Fox referred to Friends as ‘children of God’, he never called them his children. He was utterly convinced that all the faithful were children of God and the right relationship with each other is as friends, as in Jesus’ teaching in John’s Gospel.<sup>55</sup>

Fox’s brilliant metaphor of the ‘household of God’ worked in both directions. It illuminated God’s love for dependent humanity and it threw the spotlight on the gentle, nurturing relationships that parents (plus guardians, and other adult Friends) should have with children. The adult-child relationship was an eternal triangle, with God giving wisdom and guidance to each ‘outward’ parent and to each child. Thus children were freed from exclusive parental control and were entitled to respect as divinely guided individuals. This was a radically different way of relating to children and young people.

As children were equal before God, they were also to be equal among Friends. Truth could flow from child to adult, as well as from adult to child. It seems that the earliest Friends saw spiritual power as no different between adult

and child, and spiritual maturity as related to the time lived as a convinced Friend. The newly convinced were warmly referred to as 'babes', and many epistles addressed all Friends as 'children'. I think we can safely assume that much of the teaching in the early epistles was intended for children as well as adult Friends, even though it was not specifically addressed to them. The appearance in the 1660s of epistles expressly for children and young people signals the beginnings of a worrying sense of difference!

Family life among early Quakers was beset by instability. Many parents were imprisoned, unpredictably and for long periods, some being so weakened by ill-health and injury that death came early. Children were born in prison, went to prison with their mothers, and looked after their dying parents in prison. Some of the earliest Quaker parents were drawn to much travelling in the ministry which disrupted the care of children. Their apocalyptic expectations, and desire to separate from 'the world' meant that family life seemed, to some, to be unimportant.

Life for Quaker children and teenagers of the first two decades was also beset by difficulties. As well as the disrupted care and distressing imprisonment of parents described above, they had to cope with violent harassment by the army, bullying and name-calling in the street, the embarrassment of plain clothing and speech and a sense of being excluded and marginalised from the church and wider community. On the other hand, they were taught by their parents and travelling ministers that they were important to God, the 'seed of the righteous',<sup>56</sup> that the Quaker way was closer to the Truth, that it was right to question the beliefs of their parents and other adults, and they should follow their own Inward Light. These childhood experiences came together in the first Quaker adolescents and young adults as a heady mixture of self-confidence, defensiveness and rebelliousness. By the late 1660s, older Friends were feeling deeply troubled by the next generation's 'sinful' behaviour, and a clamour of advice to parents and elders was produced during the 1670s.

In the manner of damage control, both Fox and Margaret Fell paid particular attention to ministering (and making their own lives into examples) about the sanctity of marriage, the sacred duty of parenting, and the responsibility of Meetings to support families and child-rearing. Some formal procedures were put in place, such as registration of travelling ministers, partly to restrain eager young ministers from neglecting their children, and partly to ensure that the Meetings took up responsibility to care for those dependants who were left behind.



### **A Quaker Meeting**

The mother on the left is wiping her child's nose!  
From late 17<sup>th</sup> century painting after Heemskirk

Courtesy of the Friends House Library, London.

Looking at the worries and criticisms expressed in these later writings of many Friends, I believe there are signs of extraordinarily liberal parenting by the first Quaker parents, based on an ideology of the individual value and evolving capacities of children, which is closely related to the present-day view of children as holders of human rights.

## Distinctive Quaker Parenting

The first clue comes from the young, articulate minister, Edward Burrough, in 1657, four years after his conviction, aged nineteen. He exhorted Friends not to “bind the conscience” of others in their households but to “be pitiful towards your children and your servants, and pass by offences rather than punish them with cruelty” and to be “encouragers of all good”.<sup>57</sup> Burrough was expressing his disapproval of Puritan and Baptist styles of parenting, and giving advice to newly convinced Friends. His words describe the beginnings of a distinctively Quaker approach to children.

Six years later, in 1663, ex-Pastor William Smith’s advice to parents was that the old ways of parenting were no longer right, because it was not “decent” to teach anything which “doth not proceed from a present manifestation of the Spirit of God”.<sup>58</sup> He also advised children and young people to question their parents’ ways, for “young people are much wronged in their infancy, whilst they are not capable of any more than what they receive from others”. Children should know that their own Light might discern that their parents customs are “not worthy to be observed”.<sup>59</sup> Similar points were made by John Crook JP<sup>60</sup> in 1678 and by Stephen Crisp<sup>61</sup> in 1680. Crook said that even children and youth growing up in Quaker families must discover their own faith, as did the first Friends, by “the inward work of God upon your own spirits.”<sup>62</sup> Crisp warned those who had grown up among Friends not to rely on their outward reputation as Quakers because those who “have lightly come by their profession, will lightly esteem it, and lightly let it go again”.<sup>63</sup>

If a child was being guided by God, it must have seemed that he or she had no need to be guided by parents. Some parents felt that they should not interfere with God’s work in the child - a sort of hands-off approach which one modern historian has called “virtual parental passivity”.<sup>64</sup> This liberal and trusting approach is beautifully conveyed by Isaac Penington:

There is a pure principle of life in the heart, from whence all good springs. This thou art to mind in thyself... and to wait on the Lord... (to) be enabled by him to reach to in thy children... When thy children ask thee any questions of this nature, - What is God, where he dwells; or whether he sees them in the dark - do not reject it; but wait to feel somewhat of God raised in thee, whether the question be put forth in sensibility or in vanity; and which can give thee an advantage of stirring the good... Thou expectest, perhaps, from me, an outward rule; but I have no rule but the inward life... nor can I direct thee to any other, but to wait, that life may be revealed to thee...<sup>65</sup>

## Non-Violence in Family Life

In 1656, the Elders of Balby sent out their well-known Epistle which contained twenty points to guide Friends' behaviour. Regarding children, they gave the following guidance:

That children obey their parents in the Lord, and that parents provoke not their children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and fear of the Lord, walking before them as good examples, in gravity and godliness...<sup>66</sup>

Fox's first expression of concern about the youthful ways of Friends' children did not appear until 1667. This was well after many other leading Friends had written ministry specially for the young and for parents. Prior to this it seems that he assumed that children and parents needed no special mention. He had certainly made inclusive statements in several epistles in the 1650s, in particular affirming the value of children's witness at home,<sup>67</sup> and in Meetings.<sup>68</sup>

Over the first fifteen years of his ministry, Fox had repeated - frequently but in rather general terms - the spiritual basis for non-violence in personal relationships. For example, in 1659 he called on men<sup>69</sup> to keep themselves "in kindness" and to "keep down and be master over all passion... and let love have the pre-eminence in all and over all".<sup>70</sup> In 1666, when the persecution of Friends was increasing, he wrote: "All that do violence, cursed speakers and swearers are out of the truth and command of Christ Jesus".<sup>71</sup> And again in 1667: "Christ's religion doth not admit of any persecution or violence, nor hate of friends or enemies."<sup>72</sup>

One of Fox's last Epistles demonstrates his sustained reliance on the principle that peace is found through unity, patience and meekness, and that the best way to teach the young is to be wise and gentle examples to them:

Strive to keep in unity with the holy spirit of Christ, which is the bond of heavenly peace, and that you elders may be examples in the heavenly wisdom, and word of life, and of power and patience to the younger, that hardly know the right hand from the left; so that they may be trained up, both by the word and law in their hearts, and good examples from their elders in grace, truth, virtue, modesty, and sobriety... being adorned with a meek and a quiet spirit, which is with the Lord of a great price.<sup>73</sup>

Many other early Friends also emphasised non-violence in family relationships, some referring specifically to children. James Parnell declared that “anger is a weed” and urged everyone to treat children with good manners, courtesy and civility.<sup>74</sup> William Salt called on Friends to “Be not rash nor hasty towards them, but labour to instruct them, and with love and meekness to gain them”.<sup>75</sup> William Smith called on Friends to “take heed you do not fall into passion, and anger, and wrath, and in that exercise your wills upon them, but in wisdom, wait to be guided... in all meekness instruct them”.<sup>76</sup>

George Fox the Younger wrote a detailed Exhortation to Families in or before 1665, telling fathers and mothers not to follow the foolish wills of their children:

... neither correct them in your own wills, nor in hastiness, rashness of passion; for if ye do, then that will use the Rod, which is to be beaten with the Rod of God, and that will make your Children more stubborn and wicked, and this will offend God; but stand ye in God's Counsel, and discourage nothing in your Children, but evil, and let them have that which is meet, just, and reasonable, and no more, that none of God's Creatures be wasted.<sup>77</sup>

Others simply spoke about human relationships in general. George Fox the Younger advised Friends that breaking forth into rage and scorn makes the seed grow weak and reminded Friends that the Light is gentle and “can bear all”.<sup>78</sup> Richard Hubberthorne, Samuel Fisher and Francis Howgill warned that: “Violence and force begets enmity and hatred in the heart against the imposers, hardens the heart against those things imposed, true faith is a gift of God; love and gentleness can persuade to willing obedience”.<sup>79</sup>

It seems likely that many early Quaker parents found this consistently optimistic message so close to their longings for peaceful and tender family relationships, that they stopped using corporal punishment, even though they had no models of what to do instead.



## Obedience – the Crux of the Dilemma

The spiritual experiences of early Friends had led them to a complete rejection of rules and human authority in spiritual and behavioural matters. Fox urged Friends to: "...own and be obedient to the commands of the Lord, that ye may stand out of, and above all contrary commands of man".<sup>80</sup>

In his Journal, Fox occasionally described Friends as having become obedient to the Truth, or obedient to the Lord/Christ, especially when he was in court defending Friends from charges of not obeying the state law. It was a strong defence in this context. In his epistles, however, he consistently avoided authoritarian language, preferring imperatives such as 'follow', 'hear/hearken', 'keep' and 'walk.' He simply kept repeating that, if people waited and listened, in a humble state of mind, they would discover the true way and follow it. Human pressure was not only unnecessary but would mislead people from discovering it for themselves.<sup>81</sup> In none of his Epistles that deal specifically with children or youth does Fox call on children to obey their parents.

Penington had a similar position on obedience. He exhorted his children to learn to know, hear, fear and obey "the voice of God's witness in you" but he did not require them to obey himself. Penington saw himself not as a powerful authority to his children, but rather as a channel of God's guidance. Feeling weak and desperate in his prison cell, he resorted to what we, today, might call 'emotional blackmail' rather than parental authority:

God... through me thus instructs you, who am your imprisoned father - and have been much grieved when I hear of any ill concerning you, it being more matter of trouble and sorrow to me than my imprisonment, or anything else I suffer... from man. Dear children...the Lord will help you... and become your teacher, guide and preserver...He may also give me wise fatherly instructions to teach you further... If you turn your back upon his light, and will not hear its reproofs, but be vain, and idle, and foolish, and rash, and quarrelling... and covering it with lies... God will be exceedingly angry with you... and may separate you from his light...<sup>82</sup>

As already described, Friends began to feel a rising concern about the behaviour of Friends' children in the early 1660s. It began with gentle messages addressed to children themselves, affirming the reality of God's guidance in them, but their attitudes became palpably more severe through the decade. In 1665 George Fox the Younger warned children not "to follow vanity, neither walk in stubbornness towards your parents" but to wait in fear of God's judgment, "that

ye may feel his Grace, and be taught by it, and be obedient unto it”.<sup>83</sup> In 1667, Isaac Penington’s deepest fear was that “the way of youth is vain, and foolish.” By 1669, Fox expressed the view that some of their children were “worse than many of the world’s, more loose, stubborn and disobedient”.<sup>84</sup>

It may be that Fox’s own experience of youthful turmoil and crisis had left him deeply fearful for youth. He wrote that he often felt “burthened” by the lack of restraint exercised by Quaker parents on their children, from “that liberty they run into”.<sup>85</sup> He believed that all young men would inevitably face “the evil days”, and they must be “fitted” for it well in advance by good training and good habits.<sup>86</sup> He advocated that they be “kept under a bridle and restraint, and be nurtured and trained up in the fear and wisdom of God”, so that “all lightness, frothiness, wildness and looseness, may be kept down”.<sup>87</sup> What Fox meant by “a bridle and restraint” will be discussed later, in relation to physical punishment. However, it is important to take note here of Fox’s use of strikingly non-judgmental language and his unflagging belief that children are best guided by participating in Meetings for Worship and by observing exemplary behaviour.

By the end of the decade, Fox was probably being prompted by the women at Swarthmore Hall. In 1669 he married Margaret Fell and wrote two exceptionally long and comprehensive Epistles on caring for children, defining what has been described as “a new doctrine of Christian nurture”:<sup>88</sup>

...And all Friends, see that your children be trained up in soberness, and holiness, and righteousness and temperance, and meekness, and gentleness and lowliness, and modesty in their apparel and carriage, and so to exhort your children and families in the truth, that the lord may be glorified in all your families. And teach your children when they are young, then will they remember it when they are old.<sup>89</sup>

Here we can see the formal emergence of the second big controversy to strike at the unity of Friends, the first having been the establishment of women’s Meetings. Over the next fifty years, the question of how to rear children in the truth, and how to deal with unacceptable behaviour, became a compelling concern at most Yearly Meetings.<sup>90</sup> Friends became obsessed with worries about child-rearing, because they were still terrified by sin, because their own salvation depended on getting it right, because undisciplined children brought disrepute to the Society, and because the future of the true way was at stake.

One reaction was simply to adapt their position on sin. While the child had been born innocent, his or her inclination to sin was still great. Unable to recast

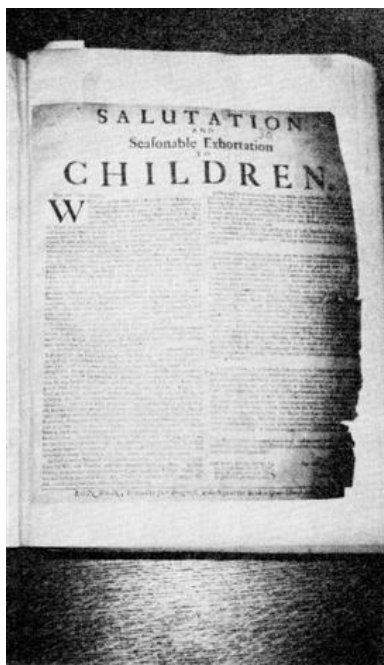
their understanding of what behaviour was sinful, and their literal images of God's punishment, the only way forward was to protect children from temptation. Friends turned back to the approach of their own parents, albeit softened by the principle of innocence, and restrained by seeing the Light in the child. Obedience to parents and hence the approved use of physical punishment as a last resort became gradually (and I suspect painfully) reinserted into Quaker parenting styles.

In 1677, a Dutch Quaker Geertruyd Dericks Niesen, gave parenting advice to Friends in Colchester, in language that suggests the issue was now one of Friends' most pressing, and distressing, concerns:

The *first* thing lies before me is, concerning the bringing up of children, which is a very weighty concern; ... they are God's Creatures and given to Parents as a Gift from him... I entreat you watch over the younger for good and be good patterns and Holy examples to them, and use all diligence to admonish and counsel, with much tenderness...<sup>91</sup>

Niesen believed that the problems sprang from the parents' pride in their children, which encouraged them to be perverse, wilful and vain. She remonstrated with Quaker parents for being unwilling to give "due correction", including use of the rod to correct disobedience.<sup>92</sup> This appears to be the first explicit advice to use physical punishment and came after twenty five years of trying to rear children without it.

By the 1680s youthful disobedience was thoroughly to the fore in some Friends' minds. Much ministry flowed to children themselves, begging them to obey the Spirit within and so be in unity with their parents and elders about Quaker behaviour. From Bridewell Prison, Dorcas Dole urged the "Dear and Tender Children" who had grown up in Quaker families, to "watch against the Disobedient Nature, which keeps you in Disobedience to the Lord and to your Parents".<sup>93</sup> Friends became desperately concerned about slipping standards of behaviour and the effect this was having on



the reputation of the Society. They fixed on young Friends' interest in 'gay' and 'costly' clothing as the most visible sign of their departure from the Truth. In 1685, a Women's Meeting reproached young people for their "lace and ribbands"<sup>94</sup> and the same year a Men's Meeting advised Young Friends against "gay Cloathing, with sumptuous and costly array, such as many of us, for Truth's sake, have denied and put off".<sup>95</sup>

In 1686, Theophila Townsend entreated women Friends to "watch over the younger for good... and use all diligence to admonish and counsel, with much tenderness... and give no liberty to your children to please them in any thing that is contrary to truth..." She bade them not to allow "naked necks and backs, the needless pinches and ruffles..."<sup>96</sup> because it spoiled their "comely order" and brought the Society into disrepute.

In 1689, George Whitehead lamented that many 'Friends of the younger sort'<sup>97</sup> were "degenerating into pride, and height of spirit and apparel".<sup>98</sup> Like Niesen, he did not blame the children for their errors. He held that the main responsibility lay with parents, who indulged their children's pride in appearance at home, so that "they embrace a spirit of pride and irreverence towards God and disregard to his truth".<sup>99</sup>

## **The Real Rod or the Divine Rod**

Although Fox clearly advocated nonviolent options to parents and disapproved of domestic violence, it is more difficult to sort out his views on physical punishment. When he was drawn into the controversy over 'chastisement' and 'correction', which began to emerge in the late 1660s, he began by advocating tenderness even towards children who had fallen into the metaphorical 'ditch'.<sup>100</sup> When he referred to the Divine Rod of judgment which God uses against sin, he did not support a rod of iron being used on a sinner.<sup>101</sup>

However, in the case of "stubborn, rebellious and wilful" children, Fox advocated that "they must have greater stripes and sorer..."<sup>102</sup> but said that "Christ manifest in their flesh... doth condemn the sin in their flesh... and finishes the transgression."<sup>103</sup> It is not clear therefore whether, on this occasion, he meant physical stripes or those given inwardly by Christ. Anyway, it was advice that he did not repeat.

In 1669 Fox endorsed the view being revived by other Friends that children need to have their 'stubborn will' broken by parental restraint.<sup>104</sup> Then, in his very next Epistle, he let fly with unusually vivid language, as if to rouse his audience from apathy. Likening youth to "wild asses and heifers" he advised parents to "keep all such under the yoke; and hinder and stop the wickedness that would break forth".<sup>105</sup> Although he was ministering to increasing concerns about *obedience*, his emphasis was on prevention: by attendance at Meeting for Worship, learning by example and the Bible, and being prepared for a worthy independent adult life through apprenticeships. In 1672, having returned from America, he wrote to Women's Meetings, urging them "to be teachers of good things" and "to nourish, instruct, admonish, exhort and rebuke all the contrary; and to refresh and cherish every tender one".<sup>106</sup>

In 1683, William Smith gave much clearer guidance to parents. He saw the Rod (with an upper-case R) as an undesirable last resort:

Neither teach ye them to strike in the least, nor provoke them to have any delight to see striking; for thereby afterwards they come to strike one another, and hurt one another; and so you teach your own children to be unnatural one to another; and then when they are a little grown up, to strike and beat them for striking one another, the which you taught them: Neither teach ye them to speak wicked words, nor many words;... Neither teach ye them to call Names in the least, nor any such thing, and in wisdom watch over them, and then you will know when to rebuke, and when to cherish, when to correct, and when to spare, and the Rod will the fall into its right place...<sup>107</sup>

William Penn crystallised many of the views which were emerging at the turn of the century. He asserted that obedience was a part of the natural law: "He that begets thee, owns thee; and has a natural right over thee." The obligation to obey the parent is unavoidable because it "is as indissoluble as the relation" between parent and child. Rebellion in children was "renouncing God, the great parent of all" and "is not only our duty it is our interest...we prolong (our life) by obeying (our parents)."<sup>108</sup> In 1699 he summed up his position forcefully but not unambiguously:

If God give you children, love them with wisdom, correct them with affection; never strike in passion, and suit correction to their age as well as their fault., Convince them of their error, before you chastise them...Punish them more by their understanding than by the rod, and show them folly, shame and undutifulness ... rather with a grieved countenance than an angry one, and you will sooner affect their natures, and with a nobler sense, than ...rude chastisement can produce.<sup>109</sup>

‘Chastisement’ has biblical connotations and means authoritative correction or disciplinary punishment through suffering (OED). The word tends therefore to legitimise physical (or corporal) punishments (such as beating and whipping) in order to purify the soul with pain and distress. ‘Correction’ does not have the biblical association, and it is about ‘amending what is wrong or faulty’. It is interesting to note that many Friends only used the term ‘correction’, even when referring to physical punishment, possibly because they saw children as innocent and not in need of ‘purification’.

In 1699 the elderly Quaker minister John Crook knew he was close to death. His life story contains all the experiences of this earliest generation and perhaps his last message to his grandchildren encapsulates the mixture of feelings in older Friends at the turn of the century. He was the father of six children and a respected Justice of the Peace when he was convinced at 37 years, by the 33 year-old William Dewsbury. The following year, 1655, he became a recognised minister and gave faithful service for forty four years. Because of his Quakerism, his JP appointment was taken away and he was disinherited by his parents, the latter being “a sharp affliction” to him. He was also imprisoned in several occasions. On 1 Jan 1699, he wrote this humble, anxious letter to his grandchildren:

I must leave you in a wicked age, but commend you to the measure of the grace of God in your inward parts... and as you love it, and mind the teachings of it, you will find it a counsellor to instruct you in the way everlasting.

By experience I can speak it, that the ways of holiness afford more true comfort and peace to the upright soul, than the greatest pleasures this world can afford; the former reaches the heart and soul, while the delights of the world are but show, and appearance only, vanishing like a dream... as the Lord hath shewed me, for I have seen his wonders in the deeps: therefore I say again, despise not afflictions, but embrace them as messengers of peace to your souls.<sup>110</sup>

While many of the children of the earliest Quakers did not adopt Quakerism, the perspective of those who became convinced was just as powerful. Sixteen-year-old Samuel Bownas shed an “abundance of tears” in Meeting and fought off the urge to minister for three weeks, until he could fight it no more.<sup>111</sup> The even younger George Bewley, who had grown up with exemplary Quaker parenting, experienced “a glorious light... great calmness and sweetness” in worship. When he heard an elder earnestly questioning whether the present Quaker youth would become “a generation to serve the Lord”<sup>112</sup> Twelve-year-old

George had no doubts because young Friends, after Meeting, would “tell one another in love how it was with us, and encourage each other... that we might grow in grace as we grew in years”.<sup>113</sup>

## The Turn of the Century – New Light Coming

By the end of a tumultuous century, some leading Friends were advocating strict parental discipline. This was justified by new arguments that *parents’* Light was the primary channel for God’s guidance to the child. No longer was the child’s own Light sufficient. The oneness of the Light meant that parents could impose their Light on their children, and children’s Light would require them to obey. If a child did not obey, he or she would not be following the Inward Light and therefore needed to be punished.

In 1704 Thomas Thomson saw children as having “foolhardiness” in their hearts, and being without a “sense of the truth”.<sup>114</sup> He exhorted parents to “travel deeply in the spirit before the Lord both Day and Night” for “the Welfare and Preservation of their children”. By being good examples to their children and by not “giving way to passion and anger; nor yet sparing the rod when there is occasion for the same” parents could be sure of “a good conscience towards their children.”

In 1709 John Banks, who lay awake at night worrying about his children,<sup>115</sup> advocated a firm use of the rod<sup>116</sup> to make disobedient children weep, provided they were old enough to understand their offence. He also advocated it for parents who were unwilling to correct their children or who did so in “wrath, anger and passion”! However he urged them “to wait in patience” and to understand children’s individuality, so as to be able to “commune with them and lay their faults before them, in love and tenderness, to reach the good part in them”. Personally, he rejoiced when this approach drew “tears from them without whipping”.<sup>117</sup>

Nevertheless, Quaker ministry to youth did not threaten punishment. Rather it entreated “dear and tender children” to “fly youthful Vanities” for they “darken the judgement”.<sup>118</sup> There were increasing warnings against “prophane and lacious [sic] Books and Pamphlets, which tend to the stirring up a vain Mind” and a growing use of the scriptures by “publick reading of them in their families and private meditating”.<sup>119</sup>

About one third of the annual London Yearly Meeting Epistles issued from 1690 to 1750 contain paragraphs about children. Interestingly though, they do not tackle the issue of physical punishment. Only two Epistles refer to parental authority to restrain children (1710) and give reproof “in the spirit of love and sound judgment” (1724).

During the 1690s London Yearly Meeting Epistles emphasised Quaker schools, with faithful Friends as teachers, to protect children from the corrupting influences. In the 1701 Epistle, Friends were “truly comforted to hear of Friends’ godly care for the good education of their children”. In 1704, the annual Epistle called on Meetings to encourage young people to serve, and in 1711 welcomed the evidence of “divine visitations” among young Friends. For the remainder of the century, children were characterised as weak (1720), having feeble minds (1723), and in need of early direction (1757). Fears focussed on “vain and idle” or “licentious” books and pamphlets (1720, 23, 29 and 67), protection from emotional entanglements (1723, 29, 80), vain fashion (1767) and expensive attire (1798).

During the 18th century, under many behavioural limits introduced by Friends to provide a hedge to protect the ‘true way’, the Light in children became progressively more hidden to adult eyes. Images of punishing misery on Earth took the place of eternal damnation. In the 1770s John Phipps spoke fearfully about a “subtil enemy” which entangled the mind and made way for “unsuitable connections, unhappy marriages, and, in brief, every kind of corruption and misery.”<sup>120</sup> He gave formal lectures to young people in Norwich and Newcastle (and possibly elsewhere) warning them about “gilded baits” and “little foxes.” Without any reference at all to their own Inward Light, he called on them to “studiously avoid all friendships, flatteries, formal visits, idle pastimes, and parties of pleasure” because these activities would indispose them from humble walking with God.<sup>121</sup>

Quakers continued to struggle with the challenges raised by children and young people to their witness in family life and Meetings for the next two centuries. Having slid painfully and anxiously away from the radical insights of the 17th century, they assumed a mixture of benevolent, authoritarian, fearful and censorious attitudes to children and childhood. Nevertheless the core Quaker ministry about human behaviour - equality, humility, respect for individual faith and conscience, tenderness and patience in all relationships - survived to fuel the Quaker drive for social reform in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many of these paid



special attention to children: Quaker schools; law reform to stop the use of children as chimney sweeps; better working conditions and educational opportunity for child workers in Quaker industry; protection and education of children in prisons; special rescue efforts for child slaves, child refugees and child migrants; defence of young people against conscription; and, most recently, the campaign to stop the use of child soldiers. As a generalisation however, Quaker perspectives on children and youth stayed cautiously liberal, not markedly different from 'informed' views in the wider community.

Part of the slowness to reform relating to the status of children can be attributed to the fact that children grow up. They cease to be children, and on the whole they - we - cease to remember what it was like to be a child or young person. With more physical maturity and more awareness from information, each of us eventually gets tempted into the comfortable position that 'we adults know best'. It is a position that is inconsistent with the Truth and Love that we experience inwardly. It lacks respect, it lacks humility, and it leads us away from patient, tender listening.

Children and young people struggle against this untruth as best they can, from a position of dependence and vulnerability. My last story is about William Howitt who brought his two youngest sons to the Australian goldfields in 1852-54 and wrote about "Land Labour and Gold" and Aboriginal peoples. William's mother, Phebe Tatum, had been so physically abused by her own Quaker mother, Elizabeth Redfern, that she was sent as a child (around 1765-75) to live with London Quakers for the sake of her well-being and education.

William as a 7-10 year old, in 1803-6, often wandered alone "for miles and miles" revelling in the beautiful Nottinghamshire countryside. On one occasion he took his brother Frank, four years younger, without telling his mother, Phebe, first.

There was a great outcry and search for Frank, who was not used to stray away like me; and on his not turning up, and my being absent also, it was set down that I had taken him with me. On reaching home, my mother scolded me severely for taking this little brother out on such a ramble and with nothing to eat for the greater part of the day, and for once she resolved to chastise me. She took me into a chamber and with a riding whip began flogging away. My indignation was so much excited, that I turned and fought, and I called her "a fine thing!" At this she could not help smiling, and so the flogging ended in nothing, but this: It stirred in me the very worst passions and in after life, remembering it, I resolved never to chastise my children corporally.<sup>122</sup>

## **V: Being Open to Being Led**

As you wait in the light you will come to feel God's pure powerful presence, and life and virtue running through you, which will refresh the seed... your whole delight will be to walk in the truth... and then you will feel the life, which is the blood of Jesus Christ, cleansing you, purging you and purifying you from all sin... and you will feel God's power drawing and leading you into whatsoever he requireth you to do, and as you wait and are still ... you will clearly come to discern (that) which would draw you to act such things as the Lord doth not require you to act.<sup>123</sup>

When I perceived an inward imperative to work for the human rights of children, it was so strong, so all-encompassing, it felt as if the whole universe was waiting for me to act. It seemed that everything I had done, all the skills I had learned, were in living connectedness. I remember telling at least one Friend that it felt as if my life was making sense as it had never done before. It seemed that there was something about my time, and my abilities, that were precious to God, and that other interests and plans no longer mattered.

But when it was over, these sensations had already blown away into nothingness, and now I can barely recall how it felt.

### **In Living Connectedness**

Much of what I have included in this chapter is based on notes I made on long journeys, or after meetings, trying to express the inexplicable in order to stay true to it. Through these notes, I am reminded of an indescribable sense of connectedness which came from outside me and yet deeply within me. This experience of connectedness contains a curious duality of values - on the one

hand, life and human achievements seem not to matter at all, and yet doing God's work in the world is utterly, passionately desired.

In this lies the disciple's familiar dilemma - how open should one be to giving up existing commitments and relationships? Many of the earliest Friends devoted their lives to travelling ministry in keeping with George Fox's early advice to:

...wait in the pure spirit ...and then ye will come to walk with the lord, forsaking all, father, mother, wife, and children, lands, livings and all. Here is joining to the lord, as one spirit; he that does not forsake all is not worthy of him. <sup>124</sup>

During their long absences, the meeting looked after the forsaken spouses and children, spiritually, socially and, when necessary, financially. The powerfully led John Woolman recorded in his journal that he wound up his business and ensured his family were well provided for, before he left to witness against the evil of slavery. Women Friends finding themselves led to work for such things as better prison conditions, women's suffrage, or peace, mostly managed to follow their leading without leaving their family for long periods. With increasing emphasis on shared parenting between partners, I do not think that women Friends will necessarily see it that way in future.

For me there was no opting out of the leading, but I wanted to minimise the impact of my 'othermindedness' on my family as best I could. On the other hand, I had no doubt that they too would have to bear what could not be avoided. Fortunately, my family, loving me and being faced with my unflagging determination, seemed to absorb some sense of purpose too, and developed tolerant adaptations to my travelling and absences, and my unpredictable states of mind. I was and am grateful for the gentle upholding of my whole family by the Spirit.

Perhaps I should explain here that I am comfortable with the word 'work' to describe what I did, because that is how I came to see it. Over some ten years, I undertook a series of formal responsibilities for the Australian Section of Defence for Children International. This was on an unpaid basis except for one six-month specifically-funded project, and, for several years, my commitment was more or less full-time. While the issue of Australia Yearly Meeting did not bother me, I felt that the description 'volunteer' was not accurate. I often found myself at meetings where everyone else was there because of their paid job. I didn't want to be seen as different from them (less well informed, less reliable, or worse, 'more

admirable'), I didn't want to acquire the image of a 'Lady Bountiful', and I did want to be taken seriously. So, because I believed I was applying all my professional skills to the work, and because I felt at least as committed as a paid employee is, I came to use 'work', and only explained I was unpaid when asked about it.

I should also add that it was not necessary to my family for me to bring home an income. In this sense I was privileged, for my liberty must have enabled the way in which my leading developed. I wish that many more Quakers, young and old, had the freedom to follow their leading. The long-standing Quaker tradition of releasing Friends by providing basic financial support and child care, so they can freely give service is not strongly developed in Australia, to our loss. I would like to see us establish more ways to enable Friends to share their leading by travelling among us and working with meetings. It would enrich our spiritual lives and strengthen our social witness.

Often I was asked, "What does your husband think about all this?" I had two answers depending on the asker. Sometimes, I would say, truthfully, that he was wonderfully supportive and generous, and the asker would remark how lucky I was. But at other times, I would say, also truthfully, "He knows he has no choice" and the asker would look rather shocked! Only rarely did I feel able to explain that I was engaged in something beyond my own understanding and choice.

My sense of being led seemed to be renewed by vivid images, powerful dreams and plunging emotions. They were like electric life-giving moments of connection. It was as if I was being made alive again and again to the deepest meaning of my being - my life - each time experiencing it as new. I still feel in awe of this mysterious process. We change and grow as human beings, but the Truth does not change or grow. Each momentary connection with Truth is timeless, made available to us at any age, in any situation. The same core insights keep recurring, inspiration is refreshed and energy is replenished, in bountiful affirmations of that which is eternal.

Nevertheless, my certainty of being led was accompanied by chronic doubts about the details of what to actually *do*, and whether I was able really to do it. I felt weak in the spotlight of God everywhere I went and humbled by the experience of God's purpose in my darkest corners. I knew I must trust the process because it would, if I remained in a continuous attitude of listening and waiting, give me inward guidance at each step.<sup>125</sup> People commented on my

dogged persistence. I think now that this is probably *the* defining symptom of being led - a seemingly extraordinary persistence, which pays no regard to human measures of achievement and is not shaken by the non-appearance of outcomes in the world.

As I reflect on these experiences, it appears to me that there is a range of divine communications which we are able to receive individually, when we are open enough:

- *light* which is always there, giving us insights into what is right and true;
- *moments of connectedness* which happen involuntarily giving an experience of love and personal validation;
- *promptings* which niggle away within our conscience (associated with guilt and shame) or within our hearts (associated with longings and inspiration);
- *leadings* which are quite specific, personal and painful to deny; and
- *concerns* which have an enduring certainty of rightness as a broad and long-term field of witness, individually or corporately.

The faithful individual may actually experience these as a path or in cycles. Individually or corporately we have the power to remain closed, using 'rational' self-interest or 'realistic' doubts, but it wounds our Spirit to do so, and breaks our connection with God. Discernment is the conscious prayerful discipline we can (must, in fact) follow to find clarity about openings, different paths or timing, and to guard against self-interest on the one hand and human scepticism on the other. It is about paying attention to God's guidance, not about taking control ourselves.

After several years of following where the leading took me, I did begin to question whether my persistence was really a form of pride. Maybe, I thought, I was really driven by a covert search for recognition and praise; or maybe I simply could not abide the idea of failure. This form of self-doubt was hard to share. In 2001, I was in a Juicy Quakerism workshop with Alex Wildwood at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre (UK), sobbing desperately about the ineffectiveness of what I had done, when suddenly I gave a resigned sigh, "Maybe it doesn't matter." This humanly impossible shift in my human acceptance of failing, felt like a huge relief. I had acknowledged that a desire for 'success on human terms' may have been hanging around my mind, and I had pushed it aside. My work and

effectiveness did matter, but not to my sense of self-worth. It mattered only to the world's children, and to my faithfulness to God. It was as if my human limitations and my sense of being led found a new balance, and I could move forward again without fear.

Indeed, I soon moved into a clarity that my leading had become old. When the activity becomes essential to one's personal identity in the world, to important relationships with other people, it no longer feels like a leading in the way I had experienced it. Maybe, a better word would be 'concern'. My sense of unshakeable rightness, my ability to persist faded, and I often felt distressed and confused, as I separated myself from a mysteriously different state and came 'back to earth' as it were. This was prolonged because I had taken on many daily responsibilities in the DCI office. But gradually I ceased to feel led in such a particular way and I knew the condition had passed. I still feel a concern for the rights of children. I get promptings and have choices, and I daily ask for inward guidance - but the condition is quite different.

## The Symptoms of a Leading

Far be it for me to try to explain what leadings really are. They are mystical, wordless, inexplicable. I can only attempt to identify from my own experience what seem to be the characteristics and how they make sense together as a 'condition'. I hope that this will shed light on how we, as individual Friends and as Meetings, can best nurture and support each other to be instruments in God's work in the world.

I am deliberately using medical metaphors here - symptoms, condition etc. Of course I do not think that being led is an illness. But I do think that it is an altered state of mind, with some of the characteristics of mental disturbance, and that it makes the subject (not 'sufferer'!) vulnerable to being seen as mad (in both the humorous and serious senses). I have already indicated that I had physiological as well as emotional swings, and recurring periods of obsession, despair and failure. It would be easy to see these as signs of mental instability. However, *my* understanding of what was happening would not be at all undermined if it were demonstrated that my brain had behaved chemically in ways similar to mental disturbance. I was indeed being mightily disturbed!

What seems to be different is the way in which led individuals see themselves in the world, their ability to act purposefully and to have cheerful, outgoing, respectful relationships with others. At any time, miserable or ecstatic, I could sit down with anyone who was interested, and describe what I was trying to do, welcome their interest, discuss ways in which they could become involved too, and share my joy and pain over small but insufficient achievements. Some early Friends, including George Fox, Isaac Penington and James Naylor, are known to have had periods of bleak despair, which have been classed as 'depression' by some writers. Given the suffering of Friends and the terrible state of their world, it seems natural to me that they would despair - precisely because of their clear insight and tender love for the human condition. In our world, there is no less human suffering than there was then. It is still rooted in materialistic selfishness and superficial pleasure, and though present-day Quakers no longer suffer physical persecution for our vision, we too must frequently despair if we are at all engaged with reality.

The possibility of being led, of receiving divine direction to do something beyond our understanding but of sacred importance, has been experienced by Quakers powerfully and repeatedly since the 17th century. Early Friends used vivid, earthy language and references to the full range of emotions to communicate how they experienced God's guidance: tenderness, love, humility, weakness, fear, sorrow, shame. They felt God's tender love "in their bowels" (today we might admit to "gut feelings") and knew Truth in their hearts. They could do so because they were certain that the spiritual life had physical reality and power. Today we prefer to conceal our spiritual lives with intellectual language, thus avoiding admitting to experiences which can barely be put into words, let alone given a rational explanation. Under the influence of scientific method and rational thinking, we feel we must always acknowledge our subjectivity, our struggle with doubts and the logical 'possibility of being wrong'. So we venture into strong language with much more caution. Yet rational language and intellectualised concepts put up tough defences against the very process that we treasure and seek.

My experience of being led has given me an extraordinary certainty that God is with me, at the deepest level of my being, loving, guiding, prompting, restoring, replenishing, working with my humanness, through my senses and my emotions, especially my responses to love, peace, truth, justice, beauty, harmony, sorrow, to bring about what is most precious to God, on earth. I do not know what the purpose, the goal, of creation is, but my senses open me to its qualities. There may not even be a 'purpose', except to live our lives this way. The question of

purpose remains impossible, unposeable, because purpose is a human construct. I am simply certain I can trust.

From our deepest being, using all the forces in creation, the Spirit pushes itself into our awareness and demands our complete attention via a racing pulse, immobility, darkness in our eyes, loss of hearing, and waves of emotion. These are whole-of-body recognitions of the Spirit as it breaks into our humanness and takes us wholly in its grip. How else is 'that which is beyond words' to communicate with us? And how else can we reply except through our bodies with laughter, tears, sweat, shivers, knots in the belly, tight throat, dry mouth? When we dismiss these as passing emotions, we deny the Spirit and turn away from God. Indeed they will pass if they are not recognised and so will the light therein. This is the way Spirit leads, and we must be open to it. We must embrace the Spirit's work within ourselves and others, not try to moderate or control it, and, above all, we must take notice of the messages we receive.

## Certainty and Adventure

First pass through all things, one after another, as the light leadeth you; and with a true measure, see if you be from under the power of any... Stand fast in that which you have proved to be liberty indeed... stand single in your minds to follow nothing New nor Old, but what the Holy Spirit leads into; for the Work is a Work you know not, nor the way do you know, but as it is learned in the Obedience by which the Soul is purified... Wherefore give all diligence to the Spirit's motions and Leadings, what it moves against and what it leads to... the old bonds are broken by the Spirit's Leading and to serve in the newness of Spirit. And as you mind the leadings of the Spirit... you will come to know your creator.<sup>126</sup>

Turning away from a leading is turning away from the Spirit, going from light into darkness. It is a risky place to be - we risk our very lives if we go with the leading but we risk our spiritual integrity if we do not. We are given the inward ear to hear, and we are called to use all our talents, all our skills, all our innocence and all our weakness, to witness it fully in our humanness. As long as we hold fast to the inward guide that acts only in love and truth, we can be sure - have faith - that each step will light the next, as we move into openings in the 'real world'.

Analysing the accounts of the earliest Friends, Douglas Gwyn has identified<sup>127</sup> a commonly experienced seeking/finding process, which begins with



the moment when belief and lived experience are suddenly seen to correspond, or be mutually dependent. This is followed by seeing the truth as coherent – that is, small experiences of truth are coherent with a great and complete truth, or divine reality. Thirdly, the directly experienced truth is put into practices which serve it and keep us open to it. Finally there is a moment when pragmatic decision-making is accepted, when the way forward is not clear because it is understood that Truth will continue to be revealed.

In my own experience, I understand this as a process which begins with a longing for consistency between belief and action, and turns into a sense of Truth which is both present and beyond comprehension. Out of this grows a desire to witness Truth and give service in the world. Finally this service is rewarded with optimism, adventurousness and persistence. I have found this model very helpful in understanding my own growth, and where other people are coming from. I understand it as a repeating cycle, because each time we engage adventurously with a new spiritual perspective, we soon have to seek and find a new coherence, or a new integration of the most recent experience of Truth.

Spiritually, then, it is essential that we take the mysterious sensation of being led very seriously indeed, trust it, pray in it, wait for clearness and pay close attention to the openings that present themselves in the real world, whatever anyone else may think! This is how we are drawn, prompted, pushed, to the greater Self that longs to embrace us. And this is how the Spirit expresses itself through us, wordlessly upholds us and rejoices in every step we take.

However, there are dangers in our natural human response. One danger is that the ego is well able to reassert itself, claim the leading and use it wilfully for self-interest, or to gain personal influence in the world. Our instinct for physical survival, together with our history of living in human hierarchies and submitting to their authority, can turn what began as a divine budding, into a human grab for resources and status. Even when we feel clear we are being guided and more or less sure what to do next, we must remain alert to the ways in which sacred work can become deadened by the desire to compete and succeed, and a real sense of rightness gets taken over by a desire for self-importance and achievement.

The real reward lies simply in knowing that one has done what one had to do, and one has learned and found a little peace in doing it. One may also have found deeper conviction and strengthened resolve, or maybe a clearer perception of what really needs to be done. Or one may simply be confronted with the same shafts of light shining on the next right step.

## Overcoming Fear and Telling Friends

In truth, in very truth I tell you, he who has faith in me will do what I am doing; and he will do greater things still because I am going to the Father.<sup>128</sup>

Most of the time, my leading seemed to keep me insulated from any sense of personal risk and curiously distanced from the expectations and requests of others. As my work progressed, I began to feel such an inward humility towards the mystery of creation and my small presence in it, that I understood what it means to have no concern about personal safety and no fear of death. I do not mean to claim that I was ever actually in danger and of course I cannot say how I would have reacted if I had been, but I felt such love accompanying me that my own life was not an issue. Any personal interests seemed to have dissolved in compassion for creation and a longing to serve God's purpose.

At other times, I sank into periods of fearful self-examination, starting with doubt and sensations of disorientation. Having lived under a sense of spiritual certainty for a while, the re-emergence of doubt felt like losing my footing, being swept about by gusts of wind - no anchor, no sense of where the ground was. I needed help to stop a rising fear of having been abandoned by God as well as having failed in my own estimation. Some prayer exercises helped restore my trust in prayer and my sense of being connected with the earth.

Particularly at these times, I wanted to be held accountable to my Meeting so that I would be guided by it in corporate worship and through various business and clearness processes. Maybe I would also have been helped by revisiting the question of my unity with the Meeting, or receiving an affirmation of the Meeting's prayerful support. Meetings are the place to explore our inward promptings adventurously, where we can rely on the safe workings of Truth and Love to get us over, and *out of reach of*, fear. They are successfully doing this when each individual worshipper knows that the meeting will hear them with Love, and that it will not compromise Truth for their comfort. Thus Meetings and personal friends can be instrumental in protecting and nurturing a leading which might otherwise shrivel under the unsympathetic glare of the world.

So we can and must describe our condition to our Meeting and to our friends, and look to them for wise and prayerful support. This does not mean expecting them to "take on the leading too", because that can only come inwardly

from God. If others do not feel concerned to help, we should not think that the leading has somehow become invalidated, or that it will conveniently slip away. A leading can find many possible expressions in the 'real world'. God does not say 'Do it now' or give such particulars as to make life impossible! Nor does the Spirit take away the power in impatience. We will be helped to wait for another way forward - and we can leave it to God. Knowing this, the led individual can develop an extraordinary tolerance of blockages and alertness to opportunities.

A second danger lies in resisting doing or saying things that make us stand out as different. If we cannot intellectualise our inward spiritual experiences, we artificially adopt a posture of uncertainty instead. There is a taboo against certainty in our scientifically-examined and information-rich culture because we can point to so many cases where people felt certain but became demonstrably wrong. We often claim uncertainty about our beliefs, our spiritual experiences, for fear of being seen as silly or wrong by Friends and colleagues. This makes it even harder for Friends who are feeling the sensations of being led to admit to the intense experiences that he/she is having. This is why it is so important to banish the taboo against expressing the certainties of our faith, and to understand that spiritual certainty is utterly personal and bears no authority over others.

We also avoid coming forward because we are afraid of judgment. In spiritual matters, the fear of judgment tends to be associated with images of a punitive God, or a punitive church, of the withdrawal of love by one's faith community. But divine punishment and any sort of withdrawal of love, by God, or by our community, has no place in the Quaker faith. We can and must stand up for our deep certainties, as well as sharing our doubts, knowing that all will be received with love and respect from our faith community.

## Leadings and the Meeting

I have been tried with the applause of the world, and none know how great a trial that has been and the deep humiliations of it; and yet I fully believe it is not nearly so dangerous as being made much of in religious society... I have sometimes felt that it was not so dangerous to be made much of in the world, as by those whom we think highly of in our own society.<sup>129</sup>

Leadings are intensely private business in our personal relationship with God. Being led does not confer any authority in the world – or in the meeting! It



*De Quakers Vergaderinge.*  
E. H. Kirk Pinxte. J. G. de Groot

### De Quakers Vergaderunge

A boy is enjoying listening to a young female minister from his special vantage point. Engraving after Heemskirk ascribed to Joseph Goole (1660-1737) of Amsterdam.

Courtesy of Friends House Library, London.

cannot be interpreted as a divine direction to require anything of anyone else. In particular it should not give rise to expectations of support and cooperation. While I was experiencing powerful surges of enthusiasm and intense focus, I never felt authorised to make demands on others. The led individual must remain respectful and loving towards the Spirit's work in others, which may lead them to act differently or hold different priorities. So I never felt it possible to say: "God has led me to bring you in on this" or "God wants you to do this with me." When I felt the need for help from human sources, I could do no more than make requests person to person, or simply as a member of the meeting, trying to keep my behaviour integrated with my commitment to equality, humility, openness and love.

However, it is clearly important, especially in the early stages, to share the experiences with trusted Friends. We can also look for a nurturing ear from among the elders of a meeting, or the ministry committee. Other Friends will be most helpful if they respond with acceptance, trust, and respect whether they feel personally touched by the leading or not. If we truly believe that leadings come from beyond us - from a mysterious connectedness with the inexpressible power we call God - we will also know that we are carrying a message which must not be hidden. The meeting is accountable to us in this and we are accountable to the meeting.

As the inward guidance becomes more specific, the led individual will invariably need to turn to the Meeting for some sort of affirmation and more formal support. Based on my own experience (described in Section II), I suggest that this first appearance of the leading in Business Meeting is best preceded by two or more Clearness Meetings, held in the usual manner. This will enable other Friends as well as the led Friend to present the need and any specific requests, probably over several consecutive Business Meetings. One response may be to establish a support group, but I sense that should be a temporary arrangement while the leading is considered by relevant committees, in particular those committees which foster service. The aim is for the Meeting as a body to reach unity with the led individual about the extent and nature of the support it can give him or her.

In some situations, the Meeting may not need to do much more than give continuing love and interest, which is what I consistently and gratefully received from my Meeting. Or it may extend to adopting the leading formally as a Meeting concern, setting up a longer term way of working on it, and raising the matter with other Meetings, and with Yearly Meeting. Even in the former case, however,

it is really very important that the led Friend's activities are treated as part of the Meeting's business and are given prayerful consideration periodically, out of an ongoing desire for unity between the individual's activity and the Meeting's understanding. The Meeting should ideally find ways of integrating the individual's work wherever possible with the Meeting's other service activity. This I did not receive from my own Meeting, and it led to feelings of alienation and disjunction, between my spiritual growth in the life of the meeting and my spiritual growth in the work I was doing. Hence my joyful sense of being blessed by Yearly Meeting 1997, when the Presiding Clerk, Patricia Firkin, was moved to ask me to speak to a Yearly Meeting Business Session. This is more fully described in Section II.

It seems to me that many of our postmodern Quaker practices have effectively suppressed the sharing of passionate longings, inward promptings and self-questioning. Yet sharing them is the most important thing we can do for each other. This is what the earliest Meetings for Worship were about, why they continued for hours and how they were *interesting* to children and young people, as well as massive numbers of seeking men and women. This why early Friends had travelling ministers, and why mechanisms for releasing Friends to follow their leading have been such important aspects of our tradition. But even ministry in Meetings for Worship is being constrained by the taboo against certainty and emotion, and a general reluctance to use strong metaphors and vivid language.

When we take the risk of sharing our inward spiritual lives, it is an affirmation of the seeking process and a gesture of respect and trust in others. It enriches the faith and understanding of our community and helps to strengthen our service and outreach in the world. We truly need to talk to each other about who and where God is for us, what we hear in our inward ear, how we are being drawn, prompted and pushed in action. What we are sensing is our small place in creation. We need to do this in daily conversation, in ministry, in Business Meetings, in minutes and epistles, in worship-sharing, in share-and-tell, and in the *Australian Friend*. I do not doubt that we will continue sharing our human self-effacing doubts and failings with one another. But let us not be afraid of sharing our certainties as well! And when confronted with the symptoms of a leading, in ourselves or in someone else, let us rejoice at the nearness of God, let us share it with awe, and seek an adventurous unity in following it.

## VI: CONCLUSION: WITNESSING RESPECT FOR THE YOUNG

The Spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing which is evil and again to move unto it...(Quaker Peace Testimony, 1661)<sup>130</sup>

Some of the earliest Quakers used phrases such as ‘Friends of the younger sort’ to demonstrate the importance they attached to treating children and young people as people of no less value. This awareness was rooted deeply in their conviction that the same divine light was present in every adult and every child, and that each individual, whatever their age, was guided by God. George Fox’s famous advice to “greet that of God in every man” was meant by him, as is clear from the inclusive style of his epistles, to include everyone – women and men, girls and boys. Importantly we often replace Fox’s word ‘man’ with our preferred word ‘everyone’, when we use this quotation in a modern context.

Another important Quaker reference point is the advice to be open to the light ‘from wherever it may come.’ The light, or God’s guidance on how to live in truth and love, can come from people, as well as from religious writing of all sorts. But when we use ‘*everyone*’ or ‘*wherever*’ do we include children and young people as well as adults in the little mental pictures that flash through our minds? Do you, like me, usually have an image in your head of people who are all the same size and who have basically the same way of communicating what they experience? It is a familiar trap to me, and it often takes a child or young person to correct me and keep me more inclusive.

The most serious disadvantage suffered by children and young people is their invisibility to adults. This is a part of our culture which must change. It has no part in the practice of our faith! As Terry Oakley puts it,

If we define human by reference only to adults, then of course children are excluded. But so might the mentally ill, those with learning difficulties, those who are differently abled. Children do have experience of God and given appropriate settings and media can share their experience and insight with others.<sup>131</sup>

No doubt there are many reasons why many adults simply do not notice the children and young people who are present in the group (except when they become ‘a nuisance’) and I do not want to speculate here why Friends are also rather like that. It is simply important to say that when this remains unrectified, we are not only failing the children, and depriving ourselves of learning from their light, and we are keeping ourselves out of hearing distance from God’s message through them.

When children are not seen, they are definitely not heard. We have multiple ways of refusing to hear what children try to tell us, or would tell us if they felt we would take them seriously. We believe that children don’t notice, and yet we also know that they are super-observant. We believe they don’t understand, and yet they constantly work at understanding and often reach clarity despite the patchy information that they have access to. We believe they won’t remember, but they have acute memories, and frightening or distressing events continue to influence their understanding of *life* for years. We believe they are resilient and will ‘grow out of it’ – which is true, but only insofar as they feel safe, valued and respected for their competencies. We believe that if we are helpful to adults, the benefits will flow to children, but the giving of more opportunity and resources to adults models the very blindness and deafness that puts children’s points of view down to the lowest priority.

It is this selective blindness and deafness, built into the economic demands of industrial, urbanised and de-spiritualised society, that permits physical punishment of children, child sexual abuse, exploitative use of children’s labour and, of course, the even more extreme forms of these human rights violations such as child domestic servitude, children living on the streets, child soldiers, the business of child prostitution and child trafficking, to flourish in our world today. It is an ironic tragedy that while the West expresses its horror of female child genital mutilation (the main justification for which is to protect girls from sexual violence), recent studies have shown that one in five women have suffered sexual abuse their childhood, most experiencing this first before age twelve.<sup>132</sup> It is equally tragic and intolerable that while the West has embraced the right of women to protection from violence in their home, it continues to have deep-seated resistance to the same protection being given to children. As a result, almost every



Western child is hit in the name of discipline (giving that noble word a very bad name!) with every traditional justification that can be scraped up – the Bible, sin, and family sanctity included.

It may seem that I am blaming the Western industrial and urbanised culture for the ill-treatment of children, when clearly there are other forms. Most of the world's traditions include pockets where cruel and sacrificial treatment of children is allowed, often related to religious belief and fear. Included in this must be the use of child sex slaves in some Hindu Temples, the severe punishment of child offenders under Islam, and traditional ritual mutilation of children in many cultures. It is interesting that these traditional violations of (some) children are often religious practices perpetuated by fear and justified as necessary for the 'protection' of the child or of the community as a whole.

This brings me back to the Quakerism of the seventeenth century, which threw out fear as a basis for the spiritual life, and adopted equality as the basis for community. This freedom from fear, and this equal value is our experience of God. This is what we hear deep in our hearts when we go quietly into ourselves, past our daily life, past the place where we are, past our human needs and wants, past our suffering, into the abundant source of love and truth which is in us, however we may name it – the inner Light, the Seed of Truth, the Inward Guide. We experience it as the biggest mystery of our humanness and do not consider ourselves any different to anyone else, except in the ways that we seek and follow its guidance.

It is this spiritual life which moves us to try to live simply and peaceably, to oppose all violence and war, to end cruelty and exploitation, to respect different understandings of truth and individual journeys of seeking. From its spring strongly flow our concerns for freedom of conscience and religion, physical and mental healing, conscientious objection to armed service, proper use of legal and political power, domestic tenderness and care, education of children, training of youth, care for the more-than-human world, fair and kind treatment of employees, an end to slavery, respect and decency towards peoples of different cultures or appearance, disarmament, community services, and peaceful negotiation for resolution of conflicts.<sup>133</sup>

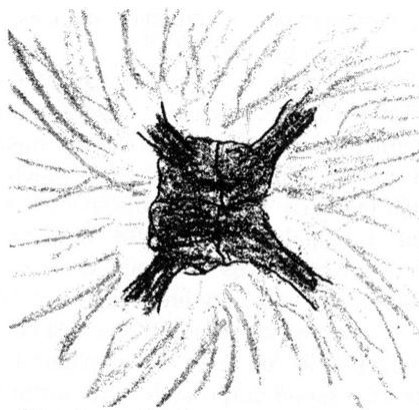
My message in this lecture is to call you to attend to the inward voice of the Spirit in you and to have no fear about its promptings and leadings, neither in yourself nor in others. You can trust it, for it will not lead you anywhere but to the *life* which is so clear in Jesus, and which the early Quakers rediscovered for

themselves. We are called to apply our faithful insights and inward promptings to our whole lives - in our ways of worship and ministry, in family and community life, in our use of the society's resources, and in our work for peace and justice. So also, *as communities of faith*, let us trust the movement of the Spirit among us. Let us respond corporately with nurturing love, even when we doubt or do not understand what an individual, in faith, is bringing to their Meeting.

The most important thing we can do for children is to *trust their inward light and encourage them as they follow it*. This means steadfastly maintaining an egalitarian and respectful attitude to children and young people, and giving time to open-hearted listening. It means seeking corporate unity with them about the things they care about. It means giving the time to keep in dialogue with them so there will always be many and varied openings for them to influence what Friends do as a body and how we do it. It means giving resources and other forms of support so they may witness their seeking and insights in the wider world as 'Friends of the younger sort'.

It also means working to eliminate all *forms of violence against them*. This is as important a dimension of our peace testimony as is our witness against war, conscription and the arms trade.

Let us look for inspiration to the radical insights of early Friends and their struggle to understand and share tenderly with each other. Let us find new ways to worship with children and young people so that we may more fully hear their Truth and nurture their capacity to speak and live by it.



**The Inner Light around the heart**  
Rhys Dryzek (b. 1989)

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